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ЦАРЬ СОБСТВЕННОЙ ПЕРСОНОЙ

Как Владимир Путин обманул всех нас

РОМАН БАДАНИН

МИХАИЛ РУБИН

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Mikhail Rubin

THE KING IN HIS OWN PERSON

How Vladimir Putin Deceived Us All

2025

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"Before Putin," "after Putin," and "without Putin" are realities that are not generally discussed in Russia. Putin has been around forever and will always be. "There is Putin, there is Russia"—that's what propaganda teaches. It's part of the legend the Russian tsar invented about himself. Ultimately, it's simply a lie. Much of what you read in the book you never knew. Or have forgotten. Or didn't attach any importance to.

25 years ago, Vladimir Putin became president of Russia. It would seem like a long time to learn everything about him. But ask yourself: are you sure you know Putin's real biography?

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Acknowledgments and necessary disclaimers

Usually, texts with titles like these are skimmed over without reading. And in vain. Working as investigative journalists, we've read dozens, if not hundreds, of introductions, disclaimers, dedications, and congratulations. Often, they contain the names of people and organizations behind the scenes, but playing a crucial, if not decisive, role in what's happening.

So, the following people, organizations and events played one or another, but always a very important role in the appearance of this book:

— Our family and friends, sacrificing their well-being so that we can engage in hectic and not particularly profitable work.

— Our colleagues. Some of the journalists whose articles we used in this work are named in the text or comments. Others are not named, either for security reasons or because the authors forgot. Our deepest gratitude goes to our colleagues at "The Project," whose investigations we frequently relied on while writing this book.

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Andrey Zakharov, Mikhail Maglov, Maria Zholobova, Vitaly Soldatskikh, Ekaterina Reznikova and Katya Arenina, Yulia Balakhonova and Olga Churakova, Sergey Titov and Alexey Korostelev, Yulia Starostina and Sofia Groysman, Boris Dubakh and Polina Makhold, Roman Romanovsky and Yulia Lukyanova - this is your book too!

"Our sources, as well as those of other journalists, helped bring the truth to light. Some of our interviewees are named in the book, which cost them a certain amount of courage. Others are not named for the same security reasons. Thank you."

— Our focus group, people who read the manu-
The letter was in various stages of completion and shared their observations and comments. Dan Treisman, Oleg Itskhoki, Ekaterina Pravilova, Sergey Sanovich, Tatyana Margolina, Boris Lvin, Lyudmila Maryina, and others, thank you for your contributions.

— Funds "Sreda", Fritt Ord, FDLV — thank you
for assistance in publishing the book.

— Tragic circumstances around us made it impossible to delay this book any longer. War, repression, emigration,

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The death of some of our friends and the prison suffering of others forced us to write all this. We hope that the book will help overcome these circumstances and
the man who gave birth to them.

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From the authors

Being a journalist in modern Russia means more than just describing events. You have to be able to interpret them. When your country,
Having been alienated from the world, he does monstrous things, people want answers: what's going on in the minds of Vladimir Putin and his inner circle, what ideas guide them, what dreams do they indulge in, and why do they act the way they do? These are reasonable questions. And it's reasonable to ask them of Russian reporters like us. If we add up our experience, it turns out that we've been working as journalists in Russia for almost 40 years, most of that time engaged in investigations, the most difficult and dangerous reporting craft. One of us worked in the Kremlin press, observing Putin and his entourage up close. Another headed the country's largest independent editorial boards. Each of us—

an enemy and a target for the Kremlin. We are an "undesirable organization" and "foreign agents." These are the two most terrifying labels for journalists in Russia, allowing us both to be immediately sent to prison. Our homes were searched, and we

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They were spying on us, they were opening criminal cases against us, initiating lawsuits, and organizing online bullying. In short, we are the right people to ask us what's going on in Vladimir Putin's head, why he is like this.

One of the authors of this book once spoke before a representative assembly -
The audience consisted entirely of foreign professors, many of whom had been closely following Russia for a long time. A member of the audience asked, "How would you describe Putin's ideology? Could it be said that it is a new version of the concept of 'Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality'?" (This was a reference to the conservative political formula of the Russian Tsar Nicholas I.)

Perhaps that moment was the starting point for this book. Anyone who has followed President Putin day after day for 25 years as closely as we have, it was obvious that he has no ideology. There are propaganda phrases, there are situationally emerging views, often radically changing to suit the situation, there is "blah-blah-blah," there is, as they say in the intelligence service, from which Putin came, a "legend," a kind of mask that a person puts on depending on the circumstances.

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actions. Then what determines the actions of Putin and his entourage?

In Russian, there are two very similar but different phraseological units: "na dushe" (in the soul) and "za dushei" (behind the soul). The first refers to something immaterial, something a person thinks about, desires, and hopes for. The second is more about the "world of things"—what material goods and pleasures a person can afford, how secure and settled they are in life. It also refers, for example, to sins.

There's nothing in Putin's soul that deserves a book. On the contrary, he's riddled with vices and secrets that have defined Russia's development over the past 25 years. Some vices have led to others.

Hem, then to the third, and all efforts to conceal them only multiplied Putin's sins. The Kremlin constantly tried to camouflage this vicious circle with ideological cliches like Russia's special path, traditional values, and the fight against Western machinations. It must be said, these attempts weren't entirely unsuccessful, even if researchers seriously believed that Putin was a new Nicholas I.

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Now that the book is ready, we can answer the question posed above. If Putin

And if he inherits something from the Russian tsars, it's not ideology. Like all past tsars, he created a court around himself, permeated with every conceivable human vice, unaccountable to state laws and moral norms. Living beautifully and ruling until death—that's the entire ideology of Putin and his nobles.

This book also has a very personal premise, which our colleagues will easily understand. Most journalists seem to use two languages simultaneously: one, dry and often boring, we speak to the readers and viewers of the publications we work for, and a second language, free of legal conventions, reservations, and omissions, we tell stories.

We say the same to our family, friends, colleagues at the bar, and followers on social media. As you can imagine, over the years this dichotomy has become, although inevitable, a heavy burden for us. When we sat down to write this book, we promised ourselves to write it as if we had known all of you, our readers, for many years, been friends with you, and opened

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We vindicate ourselves over matters large and small. That's why, friends, what would take a paragraph of text in our reports about Putin is often replaced in this book with a single word—for example, "stole," or "killed," or, most often, *"deceived."*

This doesn't mean we're moral arbiters. We're simply retelling the results of our numerous journalistic investigations, introducing you to the words of more than a hundred sources whose conversations were used to create this book. In short, we're describing events as we saw them ourselves or as eyewitnesses remembered them. When reading, please keep these points in mind.

and the fact that the realities we present here are relevant as of April 2025 – the moment when we finished working on the text.

As with any history book, witnesses can be mistaken, someone can be biased, someone's memory can fail, someone is relaying someone else's words, putting their own spin on them. Therefore, we welcome your feedback and corrections, friends.

if they appear.

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Start

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1. A safe house and two girls

How compromising evidence brought Vladimir Putin to power and became his weapon of choice.

A wooden bed with a massive headboard. On it, two slender naked girls, a blonde and a brunette, take turns kissing an older, plump man, also naked. The girls address their lover as "you," and

At the end of the pleasures, everyone busily dresses and disperses. A nearly hour-long black-and-white video of this sexual scene was shown on the evening broadcast of RTR, Russia's main state television channel, on March 17, 1999. Accompanying the video, the news anchor uttered a phrase that later became a catchphrase: "On the recording, there's a man who looks like the Prosecutor General of Russia." He was referring to Yuri Skuratov, the Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation, at that time one of the main opponents of Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Vladimir Putin. The episode described here played, if not the main, then a very important role in Putin's rapid rise to president.

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de jure, and de facto - into the sovereign tsar of Russia.

Even years later, those involved in the intimate video story are reluctant to speak to journalists and frequently lie. From the documents and memoirs examined by the authors of this book, one thing is clear: the girls, Alika and Natalya (who calls herself Zina in the recording and, in the case file,

Nadya), who at that time were moonlighting as prostitutes, met Skuratov in apartment 29 of building number 3/9 on Bolshaya Polyanka1 This is the very heart of Moscow—if you step out onto the balcony, you can see the Kremlin three hundred meters away. The apartment was purchased long before the scandal by Unikombank, headed by Ashot Egiazaryan, a member of a Moscow criminal family with close ties to the authorities. No one planned to live there—it was used for secret intimate meetings, which the banker and his brother Suren arranged for government officials they knew. On the day of the shooting, Skuratov, a married man with two children, was far from the first time in the apartment. Alika and Natalya were likely FSB informants, according to one of those involved in the incident .

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A telling scene from the video. The girls sit in front of a hidden camera, covering their nakedness, obviously aware they're being filmed. "Have you showered yet?" they ask the customer matter-of-factly. "I have," he replies, and casually removes his shoes without bending over.

Planting a girl and then *leaking* the video to the media is a practice of the secret services as old as the world, but it has probably never been used like this anywhere
actively involved in domestic political struggle, as has been the case in Russia for the past 30 years. It's ironic that a year and a half before the Skuratov video was released

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In essentially the same way, one of Skuratov's rivals for the post of Prosecutor General was discredited and subsequently fired. Valentin Kovalev, Russia's Minister of Justice, was unwisely caught on video in the company of prostitutes in a Moscow bathhouse. Kovalev resigned, but Skuratov wasn't satisfied, and in early 1999, he also opened a criminal corruption case against his former rival. Now, it seemed, fate was taking its revenge on Skuratov himself.

But it wasn't meant to be. Behind the discrediting of the Prosecutor General in 1999 were forces that were even more influential in Russia than providence itself.

As is well known, Boris Yeltsin, the first president of Russia, was a sick man with addictions. In 1996, during the break between the first and second rounds of the presidential elections, Yeltsin suffered a heart attack, one of several in his life. Yeltsin was saved —both from heart disease and from defeat. The latter required electoral fraud, and the former required the genius of cardiac surgeon Renat Akchurin, who, on November 5, 1996, switched off his heart for 56 minutes.

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the worn-out heart of Russia's first president,
and then, having installed coronary artery bypass grafts, he turned it back on.

Formally, Yeltsin ceded supreme power
Yeltsin's tenure in the country lasted only a few hours—while he lay on the operating table, the powers of the head of state were transferred to then-Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin. However, informally, Yeltsin's second term as President is more appropriately described as a period of collective rule. "In reality, after 1995, the Yeltsin family ruled," recalls businessman Shalva Chigirinsky, once close to the government and the man who built a multibillion-dollar construction and oil business in Moscow in the 1990s.

If Chigirinsky, who was later forced to flee Russia after losing his assets, is exaggerating, it's not by much. After his heart surgery, President Yeltsin was hospitalized several more times, sometimes for long periods, and rarely participated in public events. Some of his functions were taken over by members of his family and entourage—his wife Naina, his daughter Tatyana, her boyfriend, and the head of the presidential administration, Valentin Yumashev; his deputy, Alexander

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Voloshin, as well as businessmen close to the Kremlin, primarily Boris Berezovsky and his junior partner, Roman Abramovich. This group of people, not all of whom were related, was dubbed a "family" by the press. Tellingly, the morning after the release of the scandalous video featuring "a man

resembling the prosecutor general," Yeltsin convened a special meeting... in his room at the Central Clinical Hospital in western Moscow. The president was there suffering from an ulcer, but that didn't stop him from summoning the disgraced prosecutor and other officials to his bedside. The point is that it was Yeltsin who was behind the attack on Skuratov, and the person appointed to carry out this dirty mission was another visitor to the presidential chamber, FSB Director Vladimir Putin.

For a time, Skuratov was Yeltsin's loyal subordinate—during Soviet times, they both lived and worked in Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg). By law, the prosecutor general should be independent of the executive branch, as is the norm in democracies. But in Russia, this principle has never been observed, so when, by 1998, Skuratov

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When Yeltsin began to show signs of independence, they immediately decided to remove him. The conflict escalated with each passing day: the Prosecutor General summoned Yeltsin's wife and daughters for questioning, and the head of the Presidential Property Management Department, Pavel Borodin, and his good friend, the future President of Kosovo, Behgjet Pacolli, also came under suspicion. The pretext was the so-called "Mabetex affair"—an investigation into bribery during the reconstruction of the Moscow Kremlin.

The Kremlin has always been a symbol of supreme power in Russia, but it hasn't always looked as pompous as it does now. As Borodin later recalled, it was sometimes impossible to flush excrement in the Kremlin toilets—the flush didn't work, and people used buckets of water . 4 As a result, in the mid-1990s, the Kremlin began a large-scale renovation, and the main contractors were companies associated with the Swiss of Kosovar origin, Pazolli. The renovation was completed in 1996, when 44-year-old Vladimir Putin, who had recently moved from St. Petersburg, was already working as one of Borodin's deputies in the administration department. Thanks to the renovation, the Kremlin was truly transformed; the final chord was the installation of

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The president displayed an ancient icon of Our Lady of Kazan, one of the most revered icons among Orthodox Christians. It was this office, with the icon in the corner, that President Putin would later move into.

Everything would have been fine if, in 1998, Swiss prosecutors hadn't launched an investigation against one of Pacolli's companies, Mabetex. A witness's testimony revealed that Pacolli had allegedly paid kickbacks to Borodin and his associates. Putin wasn't named among the corrupt officials, but the case was serious enough. Swiss authorities requested assistance from the Russian prosecutor's office and, what now seems almost impossible, received it. Russia's left-wing opposition, eager to take revenge on the weakening Yeltsin for its loss in the 1996 presidential election, strongly supported Skuratov, who began interrogating Yeltsin's inner circle. In early 1999, the left-wing parliament refused to dismiss Skuratov. That's when Putin and the girls who were entertaining "a man resembling the Prosecutor General" at a safe house in central Moscow were brought into the case. It turned out,

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that the drain, in a figurative sense, is working in the Kremlin noticeably better than in the direct one.

The video compromising Skuratov was discussed throughout the country, and the media, especially state-owned ones, wrote about it. Skuratov unconvincingly justified
He was being held accountable, and the leftists defending him tried to drag out the case. For example, one of the communist leaders, Nikolai Kharitonov, proposed organizing an investigative experiment to prove that the person on the recording was not the real Prosecutor General . The communist did not specify how the experiment would be carried out, but the idea itself provided the Russian press with ribald jokes for months to come.

Delaying the case wasn't in the "family's" plans—presidential elections were scheduled for the following year, and Yeltsin's supporters were not in the best shape. Yeltsin was ill, if not incapacitated, there was no clear successor yet, and the president's inner circle was being implicated in the press as participants in the Kremlin corruption case. The "family" had to hurry. As already mentioned, Yeltsin called an emergency meeting just hours after the intimate video was broadcast on television.

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Among others, Skuratov and Putin appeared before the president. Colonel Putin, then director of the FSB, was appointed head of a temporary commission to investigate the "incident with the prostitutes." The Kremlin sometimes creates temporary commissions for major events—such as natural disasters or terrorist attacks with multiple casualties. But to organize a representative commission in a matter of hours to investigate an incident of adultery—nothing like this had ever happened before or since. Everything indicated that Putin had been entrusted with the very important task of *ousting* the Prosecutor General.

Putin handled the task superbly. Moreover, he did everything in his signature style, which he would later use many times: even when committing obvious illegality or dishonesty, Putin demonstratively observes the required formalities, pretending that he has no personal stake in the matter. It's like the catchphrase about "a man resembling the Prosecutor General of Russia." State television, ordered by the Kremlin to leak the Prosecutor General, was unfazed by the idea of showing someone unknown on live television.

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An hour-long video of intimate content was filmed, but in order to comply with legal formalities, the main character was not identified by name.

Skuratov was ultimately dumped for good. He was initially suspended from his post for a period of time.
After the investigation, and then his former subordinates at the Prosecutor General's Office opened a criminal case against their boss, Skuratov lost heart and eventually resigned. He tried to return to politics, running unsuccessfully in regional and even presidential elections in 2000, but voters mocked the hapless lover, and the Kremlin never favored him again.

Things turned out differently for Putin. The reprisal against Skuratov played a positive role in his career. A few more months would pass, and Yeltsin would first appoint his protégé as prime minister, and then resign early, making Putin acting president. From this position, Putin would win the March 2000 election. These were likely the last presidential elections in Putin's Russia in which there was any competition. His 2000 result was 52.94%.

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Putin subsequently "improved" the votes time and again: in all subsequent presidential elections, he never received less than 63%, thanks to falsifications and repression. "There are no longer any opponents of Putin's course, and if there are, they are mentally ill and need to be sent for medical treatment. Putin is everywhere, Putin is everything, Putin is absolute, Putin is irreplaceable,"

After some time, political scientist and one of the inspirers of the future war against Ukraine, Alexander Dugin , will say about the Russian leader.7 From some point on, the entire Russian public began to talk about Putin with the same courtly obsequiousness as they did about the political elite.

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2. The Infallible Leader

How the Russian president invented an ideology to hide his lack of one.

As the years pass, it may seem that Putin became an accidental executor of the aging president's will to eliminate a political opponent. It may also seem that the "family" and Putin were driven by considerations of high morality—

After all, it’s not good if the head of the prosecutor’s office, the person who oversees the observance of the law in the country, is caught in an extramarital affair with prostitutes, and at someone else’s expense at that.

But both are completely misleading. Putin was certainly not driven by morality, but rather by personal self-interest, vindictiveness, and cold calculation. To tell the hidden part of this story, we must return to Putin's hometown of St. Petersburg, or more precisely, Leningrad, as it was called when the current Russian president began his path to the throne.

It was to Leningrad at the very beginning of 19908 that the young KGB officer Vladimir Putin returned from a five-year assignment abroad.

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The Soviet empire was crumbling, and the democratic movement was gaining momentum. Putin, it seemed, quickly became swept up in the changes. Initially, while still in state security, he was assigned to the leadership of Leningrad State University. From there, he became an assistant, and then a deputy, to Anatoly Sobchak. For this renowned Leningrad politician, lawyer, and orator, 1990–1991 was a golden age. Riding the wave of democratic change, he first became head of the Leningrad City Council (the de facto governing body of Leningrad, the second-largest Soviet city), and a few months later was elected the first mayor of St. Petersburg (as the city was renamed in a referendum held simultaneously with the elections). Putin rode alongside Sobchak on this rapid career climb. First, he was an assistant, a "fetch-and-serve" man under Sobchak, as Shalva Chigirinsky, who met with him at the time, calls Putin, then a deputy, first deputy, and head of key departments of the St. Petersburg mayor's office —these are the positions that the current Russian president held from 1990 to 1996.

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It remains unclear what motivated officer Putin when, seemingly abandoning a career in *the "office"* —as the KGB and FSB are often called—he took a job first at a university and then with Sobchak. According to the version Putin himself has defended in interviews , he voluntarily abandoned his intelligence service, choosing a quiet civilian job, and then, in August 1991, resigned from the KGB altogether. We asked He a veteran of the Soviet secret services whether it was possible for a serving KGB officer to voluntarily take a job at a university and then at the mayor's office. The answer was unequivocal: it was fundamentally impossible, even in the chaos of the early 1990s. According to our interlocutor (as well as several other former KGB officers), Putin was sent to university and then to the mayor's office (he changed jobs after just three months) as a "cover man," that is, a KGB officer working under cover of a civilian position. Some researchers even believe that the KGB delegated Putin to power in 1990 with far-reaching plans—

to plant his agent among the democratic forces that were then gaining influence everywhere.

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Putin's time in St. Petersburg's mayor's office remains the least studied period of his life. But it is certainly no less scandalous than all the others. "We were united by the fact that we were the same..."

"How they viewed what was happening in the country at the time. And it was a complete mess," Vladimir Yakunin, a member of Putin's inner circle who had known the Russian president since the 1980s, when they both worked in the KGB, describes 1991.13 The last time we met Yakunin was at the height of the COVID pandemic in Moscow—by then, he had already lost his high-ranking positions, but not his wealth and influence. Fearing infection, Yakunin proposed a strange format for the conversation: we sat in his Moscow office in front of a video screen, and our interlocutor—

In his luxurious country house in the Moscow region, where among dozens of expensively furnished rooms, there's one whose very name sounds provocative: "fur storage." This is a separate room with a special microclimate for storing clothing made from natural fur. The presence of such a room in Yakunin's estate became public knowledge in 2013, when one of the builders posted photographs online.

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interiors of the house14. The word “fur storage” has since become a synonym in the Russian language for corruption and grotesque wealth, in which people from Putin’s circle live, and the builders of numerous residences for this circle have become almost the main *whistleblowers* of Russia - this is how the world press calls people on

whose testimony is the basis of journalistic investigations. Nameless roofers, parquet floorers
and plumbers, time after time, intentionally or accidentally, posted photographs of the outrageously luxurious palaces of Putin, Yakunin, and other heroes of this book in the public domain.

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Vladimir Yakunin's Palace in the village of Akulinino, Moscow Region. 1) House with fur coat storage (2171.4 m2). 2) Guest house (622.6 m2). 3) Bath complex (644.4 m2). 4) Gatekeeper's house (418.6 m2). 5) Service building (487.9 m2). 6) Garage for 15 car.

Anti-Corruption Foundation

But in 1991, when Yakunin, still a young KGB officer, returned to his native Leningrad from a foreign assignment similar to Putin's (unlike Putin, who served in the socialist GDR, Yakunin worked in New York, "under the cover" of the USSR mission to the UN), he had no wealth. Not much wealth.

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No one in the USSR had it back then. Yakunin's wife went shopping at a Soviet grocery store for the first time since America and returned horrified: the shelves were empty, and the customers were angry. Yakunin repeated this story many times, including while speaking to us from his estate, valued at nearly $100 million. The economic turmoil of the early 1990s led KGB officers to an interesting conclusion: while verbally lamenting the collapse of the socialist system (as Yakunin did while speaking to us), they themselves simultaneously decided to become true capitalists. And they did.

It was in the early 1990s that Putin's circle of closest friends and partners formed in St. Petersburg, many of whom will be discussed in this book. All of them would become influential and wealthy people in the following years, owners of multimillion-dollar businesses or high-ranking

officials, and they all began this journey precisely when their patron, Vladimir Putin, was working under the democratic mayor Anatoly Sobchak. The first thing that brought the initial capital to people like Yakunin or Gen-

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The "Resources for Food" operation, carried out by Sobchak's deputy in 1991-1992, became the brainchild of Nadiya Timchenko, another trusted friend of Putin. Companies selected by Putin, including those linked to Yakunin and Timchenko, exported raw materials (such as non-ferrous metals and oil) from St. Petersburg and used the proceeds to supply food to their home city, which was in dire shortage at the time. While the companies succeeded in exporting raw materials, problems arose in bringing back food—it seemed as if there was no more food in the city. City councilors investigated the matter and determined that the exporting companies had likely simply pocketed part of the proceeds. Another successful operation for Putin's circle at that time was the privatization of the St.

Petersburg bank Rossiya, which had once belonged to the city and had held the Communist Party's money. With the knowledge of the mayor's office, the bank was privatized in such a way that its owners became entirely acquaintances of the future president. The most prominent of these were Yuri Kovalchuk, now probably his closest confidant.

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Putin's adviser, and Gennady Petrov, a major Russian organized crime figure with close ties to the political establishment

Putin's time. Finally, the

third operation worthy of mention was the story of the "Ozero" dacha cooperative. Putin acquired his dacha in 1996. It stood on the shore of Komsomolskoye Lake near St. Petersburg, surrounded by similarly not particularly beautiful

new country houses of members of Putin's circle -
Yakunin, Kovalchuk, and others. The small community of friends was called the "Ozero" dacha cooperative. The dachas, however, became not only a place of relaxation for Putin's acquaintances, but also a way to earn money. Putin's house in "Ozero" was built by a St. Petersburg company with the unremarkable name "Twentieth Trust," whose managers had friendly and commercial ties not only with Putin, but also with other dacha owners from "Ozero." "Twentieth Trust" repeatedly received budget funds from the St. Petersburg mayor's office for the restoration of various buildings, however, as it later turned out...

It turned out that a significant portion of the money was taken abroad. In particular, in Spain, this money was used

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Expensive villas were built, intended, as the press reported, for Putin and his friends from "Ozero." For a time, these scams only interested Putin's critics in his native St. Petersburg, but everything began to change at the turn of 1995 and 1996. And Prosecutor General Yuri Skuratov played a crucial role in this transformation.

As we have already mentioned, the Prosecutor General was, for a time, a loyal soldier of the president. His loyalty was especially useful to Yeltsin in early 1996. At that time, the ailing president was considering whether to run for a second term: his approval ratings were catastrophically low, and his health was not encouraging. The most promising democrat capable of challenging Yeltsin was the youthful mayor of St. Petersburg. Moreover, Sobchak had actually begun secret consultations about a possible presidential run. Having received wiretaps of these conversations, Yeltsin decided to destroy Sobchak's career15 and, in the end, perhaps, achieved his goal. Prosecutor Skuratov, fulfilling the president's will, launched a large-scale investigation - "into facts of corruption and embezzlement in the St. Petersburg mayor's office." The head of the investigative

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To confirm their seriousness of intentions, the groups appointed the most "toothy" investigator of the Prosecutor General's Office, Leonid Proshkin. Before Sobchak, Proshkin was entrusted with the most high-profile cases—dis-

The investigation into the notorious Soviet gangster Sergei Maduev or the 1993 attempted coup d'état. Details of the investigation, which the public immediately dubbed the "Sobchak case," appeared in the central press: the mayor was suspected of illegally acquiring part of his large apartment in the center of St. Petersburg. The investigation was also interested in other city hall matters—this did not bode well for either Sobchak or Putin. Sobchak had already forgotten that he had recently wanted to become president.

Now, his seemingly unshakable position at the head of St. Petersburg was under threat. As a result, in the summer of 1996, he lost the mayoral election—just a month before the presidential election, in which Yeltsin, recently doomed to defeat, would defeat the Communist candidate, Gennady Zyuganov. Sobchak would never recover from his defeat, never hold any elected office, and never bask in the public's adoration.

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like in the early 90s. As soon as Sobchak ceased to be mayor, Putin also lost his job; later he said that he didn't rule out the possibility of having to take on some extra work.
to be a taxi driver.

This rare photograph, taken in late 1996, shows a sad, haggard Sobchak. Not only is he no longer mayor—
He is now a regular participant in a legal battle with his former rival, the head of the city parliament, Alexander Belyaev (far left). At the same time, Belyaev was also suing Putin, whom he accused of corruption.

Smolsky Sergey/ TASS

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Prosecutor General Skuratov was largely responsible for the downfall of Sobchak and Putin. His investigators were relentless—they continued their investigation of Sobchak even after 1996. Between 1996 and 1998, Putin was already working in Moscow, holding important positions in the Kremlin. At the same time, prosecutors were digging into embezzlement in the St. Petersburg mayor's office and interrogating Sobchak. This investigation clearly frayed the nerves of Putin and his former boss and cast a shadow.

beginning of the prospect.

By the end of autumn 1997, matters had reached the point where investigators were planning to detain Sobchak. By that time, Yeltsin had even pardoned the disgraced mayor at the request of his entourage, but Skuratov, the inimitable trickster of this story, once again played a key role. The former loyal servant was beginning to slip out of the president's control; Skuratov was supported by the left, and Sobchak was a welcome prey for them. Ultimately, Putin was forced to act. Putin, then deputy head of the presidential administration, personally organized Sobchak's secret evacuation to France, where investigators would not be able to reach him. First, the former mayor was quietly taken from the hospital,

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where he was at the time, and then flown to Paris, presumably on Gennady Timchenko's private jet.17 Later, the Russian leader would be very proud of his actions. Yeltsin's "family," not spoiled by the blind loyalty of his subordinates, was also greatly impressed by Putin's display of devotion. Sobchak's rescue would play a significant role two years later, when Yeltsin chose Putin as his successor. But perhaps no less important would be the coldness with which Putin eliminated Skuratov.

Just don't forget that when you put it under

By planting girls under the Prosecutor General and driving him to his dismissal, Putin wasn't simply currying favor with Yeltsin or simply taking revenge for the humiliation of his former boss. He was also saving his own reputation. The fact is,

That the Prosecutor General's Office, digging into corruption in the St. Petersburg mayor's office, had reached the Twentieth Trust case by 1999. This was very close to Putin. It was then that the press first began mentioning Putin and luxury real estate, separated by commas. Investigators were trying to find out whether he vacationed at a property built by the Twentieth Trust.

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An expensive villa on the Spanish Riviera. Similar to the "Sobchak case," the new investigation will be popularly dubbed the "Putin case." It, along with all other cases of violations in the St. Petersburg mayor's office, will be closed as soon as Skuratov leaves his post. As one of our sources recounts, the scandalous

filming of prosecutor Skuratov took place several months before the vulgar video was released. "Many knew Skuratov was involved in this. Catching him was a technical matter," explains a person who knew the prosecutor general, referring to his extramarital affairs. Putin was not yet director of the FSB at the time of the filming, but when he took over, he was briefed on the plan and became one of its immediate executors. One of Skuratov's subordinates, Krym-Geri Khapsirokov, and a businessman associated with him, Ashot Egiazaryan, were drawn into the operation. In exchange for their services, they were promised immunity and enviable prospects: Egiazaryan would soon become a member of parliament after Skuratov's resignation, where he would serve three terms before finally falling into disgrace and leaving.

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from the country. Khapsirokov would go on to work in the Kremlin, and his son would make a significant political career—he is currently a member of the upper house of parliament. The operation was overseen by FSB officer German Ugryumov, who soon became deputy director of the special service, responsible for "protecting the constitutional order."

Thus, when Alika and Natasha were pleasuring the Prosecutor General in front of the cameras, the future of Russia was essentially at stake—Putin could lose everything or gain everything, as ultimately happened. This had happened many times in the courts of ancient tsars: secret intrigues and family treachery determined the future of entire empires. True, in Russia, all this happened only 25 years ago.

Of course, it may now seem almost impossible that any Russian investigators could ever have actually harmed the all-powerful and immensely wealthy Putin. But up until his first presidential victory in 2000, the situation in Russian politics was different; other people were considered political heavyweights. A story told to us by a former close acquaintance of Putin's is telling: at the end

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In the 1990s, the future president, having moved to Moscow, needed a place for intimate encounters with his mistress, but he didn't yet have country residences, secret bunkers, a protocol service, or special people to provide leisure time. In short, he had no special privileges. Skuratov was rescued in such cases by Ashot Egiazaryan, and Putin was saved by Igor Sechin, his secretary, who had followed his boss from St. Petersburg. By coincidence, Sechin, having moved to Moscow, received a state-owned apartment larger than the one Putin had been given. "About four square meters," a source familiar with the story recalls with a grin. Putin, he says, was deeply offended by this, but he had no time for resentment at the time. The future president needed somewhere private with his woman. Putin and his mistress eventually met (in the absence of their owners) in Sechin's apartment, and it seemed everything happened in secret. But no, Sechin's wife, the suspicious Marina, caught her husband in the act of having another woman in the house. Sechin, even though he was an intelligence officer like Putin, couldn't withstand the interrogation and turned in his boss. Ma-

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Rina Sechina, without thinking twice, told Putin's wife Lyudmila everything. Our interlocutor doesn't know what
After this, things happened in the Putin family, but everyone involved clearly felt like losers. Except, perhaps, the woman Putin brought into his assistant's house. Later, we

Let's name her supposed name, but for now it's important to simply understand how moral the person was who dumped Skuratov for immorality.

In 1999, investigator Proshkin became Skuratov's defense attorney, but after the latter's disgrace, he disappeared from sight; he now practices law in Moscow. Some time after his resignation, Skuratov completely disappeared from Russian politics, although his children later built careers in government-affiliated companies. 24 Those who submit to Putin and accept his will are, as a rule, left alone in modern Russia; they are allowed to live and earn a living. The example of Igor Sechin, who so sadly let the president down in his younger years, confirms the same rule. Putin's loyal squire was not punished, but made a career as the president's personal secretary, overseer of the energy sector, and head of Russia's largest state-owned oil company. Just as well

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The fate of many others who swore allegiance to Putin in the 1990s —Kovalchuk, Yakunin, Timchenko, and others—was similar. If their fall from grace occurred, it was mostly undramatic. A former official who worked with Putin for a long time describes this rule this way: "Putin is a lad, he does things like a lad."25 The word "lad" refers to the self-designation of Russian gangsters in the 1990s. Their code of honor

implied immunity for those who showed loyalty. Putin, "like a lad," saved Sobchak from arrest, but was unlikely to have helped his career. Sobchak returned to Russia only after Putin dumped the Prosecutor General, but he never became a politician. In 2000, a month before Putin's victory in his first presidential election, Sobchak died suddenly in a hotel in a provincial Russian city. The cause of death was listed as a heart attack. But two versions, which immediately appeared among ordinary people, are symptomatic. According to one, Sobchak died during a date with escort girls. 26 According to the other, he was killed by the secret services on the orders of Putin, who feared a strong competitor in the election. Particularly desperate

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The storytellers combined both theories: Sobchak died in the arms of a woman sent by Putin. Sobchak's widow, Lyudmila Narusova, as if fueling all the theories at once, later stated that the official cause of death was unfounded, and she would not say what the truth was. 28 There was, however, another circumstance that added to the mystery of Sobchak's death: the people who, according to investigators, discovered his lifeless body were well-known businessmen Shabtai Kalmanovich and Andrei Burlakov. Both had once worked for the KGB and had done business with gangsters. The versions described have every chance of being either absolute nonsense or the pure truth—the truth will probably never be discovered.

It's still possible, but the possibility is becoming increasingly illusory with each passing day. However, the existence of such rumors in society speaks volumes about how ordinary Russians already perceived the morals and mores of the state elite. The country's president kills his former boss, who was running around the country in the company of escorts and secret service agents. If we add to these speculations the absolutely real fact that one of the investigators who was digging under the "Twentieth Trust" shortly after the first elections...

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If Putin's brother took monastic vows, and the second burned to death in a bathhouse under unclear circumstances29, then the picture of what was happening at the court of the Russian Tsar would become completely infernal.

And we've only just begun.

* * *

December 12, 2012. The Kremlin. President Putin delivers his annual address to the Russian parliament. Behind him are two presidential terms and four years as prime minister, when he governed Russia just as before, except standing behind the weak-willed locum tenens president Dmitry Medvedev. Now Putin

Tin returned to the presidency, whose term Medvedev dutifully extended for him to six years. Then Putin himself extended his term once again, making his own rule essentially unconstrained by any laws other than biological ones, those that regulate aging and death.

It is quite possible that the end of 2012 can be called the peak of Putin’s power: he not only

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He had just reclaimed the presidency—he had just forcibly suppressed the largest opposition protest of his reign, which had attempted to challenge his return to power. Putin knew he was in it for the long haul, and his speech to parliament was programmatic, setting the course for years to come.

What new did he say that time? Here's the central part of his speech: *"It pains me to speak of this today, but I must speak of it. Today, Russian society is experiencing a clear deficit of spiritual bonds: mercy, empathy, compassion for one another, support and mutual assistance—a deficit of what has always, throughout history, made us stronger, more powerful, something we have always been proud of. <…> Attempts by the state to intrude into the sphere of people's beliefs and views are, undoubtedly, a manifestation of totalitarianism. This is absolutely unacceptable for us. We do not intend to go down this path. We must act not through prohibitions and restrictions, but by strengthening the solid spiritual and moral foundation of society."*

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The rest of the speech (like almost all of Putin's regular speeches) is a collection of clichés and a list of successes. Putin approached the issue of "spiritual bonds" halfway through his monologue, prefacing it with a meaningful hint:

"On the streets of our cities and towns today, we see the results of what has been happening in the state, in society, in schools, in the media, and even in our own minds over the past 15 to 20 years. This is understandable. All the ideological cliches of the previous era were discarded. But, unfortunately, many moral guidelines were also lost. In a sense, we threw out the baby with the bathwater. Today, this manifests itself in indifference to public affairs, often in a willingness to tolerate corruption, brazen greed, and manifestations of extremism and offensive behavior. And all of this sometimes takes on ugly, aggressive, and provocative forms; I would even say it creates long-term threats to society, security, and even the integrity of Russia."

What is he talking about? On the streets of the "cities and towns" before Putin's speech, only one thing was noticeable.

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event: the mass anti-Putin protests that began at the end of 2011 and culminated in the violent dispersal of a rally near the Kremlin walls on May 6, 2012. This is what occupied the president's thoughts

and determined his course for the rest of his life: how to prevent protests that could deprive him of power!

According to Putin, the guarantee of his rule should be "spiritual bonds." What are these? The most famous explanatory dictionary of the Russian language, compiled in the 20th century by Professor Sergei Ozhegov, does not contain the word "bonds" in Putin's meaning. Of the notable authors who have ever used it in the same sense as Putin, one can only recall Nikolai Berdyaev, a philosopher of conservative religious views, expelled from Russia by the Bolsheviks after the 1917 Revolution. Berdyaev considered the Tsar and Orthodoxy to be the "spiritual bonds" of the Russian people, but what bonds Putin saw remained unclear on December 12, 2012. The situation began to clarify a few days later, when amendments to bill No. 186614-6 were submitted to the Russian parliament. It will be adopted with lightning speed - by the beginning

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In 2013, this document would become law, known as the "Dima Yakovlev Act." In short, this law prohibited US citizens from adopting orphans from Russia. The law was named after a Russian child with a central nervous system disorder, adopted by an American couple and tragically killed in 2008 due to the actions of his adoptive father. The law's anti-American nature was also evident because it was adopted in response to the so-called "Sergei Magnitsky Act," passed in the US just days earlier. The US law imposed sanctions against Russian officials guilty of human rights violations, while the Russian law prohibited Americans from adopting Russian orphans, often seriously ill and condemned to a miserable existence in closed boarding schools—children abandoned not only by their biological parents but also by their domestic adoptive parents. The shamelessness of the Russian law was so obvious to everyone that

People immediately began calling it the "law of scoundrels." But the Kremlin persisted: Putin and his subordinates explained the "Dima Yakovlev law"

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caring for children and family values, preserving national identity —that is, in a new way, "spiritual bonds." It seemed as if the Kremlin, like all authoritarian regimes at a certain point in their development, had relied on conservatism and nationalism. "Traditional family values," criticism of liberal democracies, persecution of LGBTQ people, the growing influence of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church, while simultaneously curtailing civil, religious, and regional liberties—all this

all the reality of the third and fourth terms of President Putin.

The image of the Russian tsar changed in line with the new course. Putin after 2012 was different from the Putin of 1999. Let's start with the fact that six months after the address about "spiritual bonds," the presidential couple, Vladimir and Lyudmila Putin, announced their divorce (in fact, they had not been a couple for several years, which we will discuss in detail later). From the standpoint of "traditional family values," the divorce did not look very good, but Putin found ways to compensate for this. If we rely on the Kremlin's statements,

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Since June 6, 2013, when he was just 60 years old, the president has had no relations with women—either platonic or physical. Putin has never had a first lady, the Kremlin has not answered questions about the president's personal life, and the Russian leader has attended all events alone. Well, not all! On major religious holidays like Easter, as befits a traditionalist autocrat, Putin demonstratively attends church. This church is often Moscow's largest Orthodox cathedral, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior near the Kremlin. Year after year, time after time, at the festive service in this cathedral, Putin stands not alone, but with another man, also divorced—Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin. This anecdotal incident sparked a wave of frivolous jokes and comments on Russian social media, the gist of which boiled down to the idea that Putin is gay.

No, Putin is certainly not gay. But, if the Kremlin is to be believed, Putin has been as chaste as a eunuch for at least ten years.

Was it enough for Putin to become a eunuch after 2012? No, it would have been much better to become a poor eunuch. And Kremlin propaganda did

him exactly like that.

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In 2009, Russian officials—for the first time in the country's history!—began publicly declaring their income and assets. This rule was introduced by "interim president" Dmitry Medvedev, to whom Putin ceded the Kremlin for four years. Medvedev himself was the first to circumvent this requirement, hiding

having placed behind his nominal owners a huge network of shadow companies that brought him profit. The president's subordinates also learned to easily circumvent the law - not a single prominent official living beyond their means was punished under it. However, even the ineffective law was disliked by officials, and in 2023 it was repealed. But all these years, Vladimir Putin has mocked anti-corruption requirements in a particularly brazen manner. Both as prime minister from 2009 to 2011 and as president after 2012, Putin published his income and property declaration. Of course, there is not a word of truth in his declaration - otherwise, why would we be writing this book! But one small detail is important. For 17 years now, information has been migrating from one of Putin's declarations to another about the president allegedly owning a Skif car trailer. Today's Russians

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Most of them don't even know what it is. "Skif" is the pride of Soviet automobile-

A trailer for tourism and outdoor activities. A sort of tent—or "dacha"—on wheels, which the authors' grandfathers might well have used for traveling.

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Advertisement for the Skif trailer, early 1980s

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Even in 1996, when Putin acquired a permanent rather than a mobile dacha, the Skif trailer was an obsolete rarity. It was obvious to everyone that Putin had no Skif to

The trailer hasn't been in use for decades, and if it ever existed, it should have rusted away long ago. The "Skif" trailer has become yet another joke in modern Russian, but the matter was serious. The president of the country, year after year,

concealed his real income, brazenly joking about a fictitious trailer. Thus, propaganda painted Putin as a self-serving eunuch, a man who doesn't need money, who goes to church on Easter and plunges into an ice hole on Epiphany, who champions family values but seemingly has no children or wife at all, and finally, a man who spends his free time camping in an old tent on wheels. Putin was made into a saint, or at least a blessed one. In September 2014, the Public Opinion Foundation conducted an interesting sociological survey: 36% of Russians named Putin as their moral authority. Not only did Putin win this survey by a huge margin,

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He appeared more righteous than the Church itself, since the head of Russian Orthodoxy, Patriarch Kirill, only received 1% of the vote. Conservatism began to be presented as Russia's state ideology. The word, previously used as a swear word, began to appear in the speeches of Russian propagandists, and in 2013, in his latest address to parliament, Putin himself would describe his course: "Of course, this is a conservative position."

Curiously, Kremlin propaganda has succeeded not only within Russia but also abroad. Dozens of Western politicians and experts have greeted Putin as the leader of a new conservatism, a politician who sincerely believes in traditional values. Putin has views, sometimes unmodern and flawed, but profound and sincere. These views have been used to explain everything: the confrontation with America, the wars in Ukraine and Syria, rapprochement with China, and the persecution of political activists.

opponents.

The point of this book is to tell you a shocking truth: Putin has no views. Just like many years ago in the case of the hidden camera of the Prosecutor General, instead of views, Putin has

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Tina's cold calculation, immoral motives, and selfish interests are masked by loud words and beautiful gestures. This book is about values in reverse.

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Part One

Faith and loyalty

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1. Anointing of the kingdom

How a KGB officer "found God"

It's not a mistake to say that modern Russia is not a particularly religious country. After the Bolshevik coup in 1917, the new authorities terrorized the church for decades, blowing up churches, executing and exiling priests, and confiscating the property of religious organizations for the state. Despite the harshest punishments, Soviet people were initially reluctant to part with the religion of their ancestors: during the 1937 USSR census, at the height of the repressions, over 55 million Soviet citizens identified themselves as believers.32 This admission was no small feat, as even such a trivial pretext was enough to send them to the Gulag (Joseph Stalin, as is well known, classified the results of that census).

During World War II, realizing the potential of religion as a factor capable of uniting the nation in the face of a dangerous enemy, the Kremlin thawed its attitude toward the church. In the most dramatic

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At a crucial moment in the war, when Nazi Germany was inflicting its first crushing defeats on the Red Army, breaking through to Moscow, Stalin addressed his fellow citizens as a pastor addresses his parishioners: "Brothers and sisters!" In 1943, immediately after the bloody Battle of Kursk, Stalin met with the hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church for the first time in Soviet history and permitted them, again for the first time in the history of the USSR, to elect a patriarch—that is, a leader of the Russian Orthodox Church recognized by the secular authorities. The gesture was a beautiful one, since the Orthodox had not had a patriarch even under the Romanovs: the Russian tsars feared the diminution of their authority by ecclesiastical authority. But in reality, Stalin's action was just that, a gesture, nothing more. Firstly, the concessions affected mainly the Russian Orthodox Church, the dominant church in the country. Other Christians, especially those of younger Protestant denominations, as well as representatives of other faiths, were much less affected by Stalin's "thaw." Secondly, the church never again became truly independent from state power. The Kremlin and the KGB controlled church life, flooding the ranks of the clergy with

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residents with their agents and "secret agents" (that is, secret agents, as informants recruited by the special services were called).

One such agent in the late Soviet era was Alexander Grigoriev. In the 1970s, he worked in the Leningrad Komsomol, the youth wing of the Communist Party, and studied at the KGB Higher School. He then served as a security adviser in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan. His superiors then sent him as an undercover agent to the Orthodox Church. An interview with one of Grigoriev's former bosses reveals that he served (conveniently, the word "serve" in Russian refers to both spy and priestly work) in the Russian Orthodox Church under the guise of priestly ordination until 1991. Archives from this period of Grigoryev's career are still classified, but press publications indicate that, among other tasks in the church, "Father Alexander" supervised Alexei Ridiger, Metropolitan of Leningrad and Novgorod, and later Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Alexy II.35 Materials on the patriarch's collaboration with the secret services are also classified. In 1991, after the dis-

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During the fall of the USSR, some KGB documents—either through oversight or deliberately—were briefly made public.36 One of the documents, in particular, listed the code names of priests who were KGB agents. After comparing minor details, journalists suggested that the agents "Drozdov" and "Mikhailov" listed in the documents were most likely the current and future Patriarchs Alexy II and Kirill (in the worldly realm, Vladimir Gundyaev, Alexy's successor as patriarch).37 Both had followed a similar path within the church: back in Soviet times, they had worked in the Russian Orthodox Church's foreign missions (and traveling abroad without the KGB's knowledge was then impossible), then handled church property issues, which also traditionally fell within the "office's" sphere of interest. Neither Alexei II38 nor Kirill ever answered questions about their work for the secret services. Just as Alexander Grigoriev never publicly admitted to serving under the guise of a priest.

What is known for sure is that he was friends with Putin. At some point during their joint careers in the Leningrad KGB, Putin and Grigoriev shared an office and socialized outside of work.

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The first official biography of the Russian president, "First Person,"39 features a photo of a young Putin and Grigoriev. They are photographed in an informal setting, somewhere in a village, sitting near a stack of freshly chopped firewood.

kremlin.ru

The colleagues became so close that in 1983, Grigoriev served as a best man at Putin's wedding to Lyudmila Shkrebneva, the president's only official wife. Grigoriev was Putin's senior comrade: he held a higher rank and had combat experience. Putin admitted that he listened to his friend's words.40

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It's difficult to say today how religious Putin and Grigoriev were in the 1980s. They likely followed the path of many Soviet citizens. After the war, the number of believers in the Soviet Union steadily declined. Many Soviet citizens were secretly baptized and even observed certain church requirements, but they were not truly religious. With the collapse of the communist regime, many began to publicly demonstrate their religious adherence, but in essence, nothing changed—deeply religious people who know and follow church laws are few in today's Russia. According to public opinion polls, the overwhelming majority of Russians describe their relationship with religion as "somewhat religious" or "not very religious" (for example, as of 2017, this totaled almost 80%), and only about 2% claim to observe Lent (one of the main requirements of Orthodoxy).

Putin followed the same path, with the caveat that at some point he needed ostentatious religiosity to achieve his own goals.

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political goals. And he easily pretended to be someone he was not.

As a child, Putin was secretly baptized by his mother (at the instigation of a religious neighbor) without the knowledge of his father, a member of the Communist Party. Many years later, the Kremlin would claim that the priest who baptized Putin was the father of the current Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, Mikhail Gundyaev; however, this version is not supported by any documents and is used rather to demonstrate the mystical connection between the state and the church. Putin never wore a pectoral cross either in his youth or during his service in the KGB. While working in the "office," he at one point even became involved in church matters, although not at the same high level as his friend Grigoriev. In his book "In the First Person," which we will often quote, the president's friend, cellist Sergei Roldugin, recalled that Putin, a rookie KGB officer, once stood in the cordon of an Easter procession near a Leningrad church. And then, when the crowd had ebbed, he, using his credentials, took his friend into the church to show him the altar. There's no mention in the memoirs of the young men being motivated by religiosity. Roldu-

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Putin explains those events this way: "No one else is allowed, but we can" (thanks to Putin's KGB service). During this episode, the young officer Putin was most likely working in the so-called Fifth Directorate. This infamous unit of the all-powerful secret service was responsible for combating "internal enemies"—dissidents, intellectuals, and priests, among whom were many people critical of the Soviet regime. Putin never spoke about this period of his biography, preferring the evasive formulation "working in the state security agencies." However, the truth was revealed by chance.

In the fall of 2022, historian Konstantin Sholmov discovered a rare document among the exhibits at the Museum of Political History in St. Petersburg, the contents of which hadn't been closely examined for nearly 50 years. It was a report of a 1976 search of the home of Leningrad nonconformist artist Oleg Volkov. He and his fellow artist Yuli Rybakov committed what was considered a horrific crime in August 1976, by Soviet standards.

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A political offense. Early in the morning, artists used rollers and white paint to paint a huge graffiti on the walls of the Peter and Paul Fortress—the very center of Leningrad: "You crucify freedom, but the human soul knows no shackles!" The artists were protesting the authorities, who had banned them from exhibiting their work. The immediate pretext for the action was the suspicious death of another Leningrad artist, Yevgeny Rukhin. He burned alive in his own studio, where, according to dissidents, KGB officers had thrown an incendiary bomb. The entire graffiti was over 40 meters long, with each letter over a meter high. As daylight approached, this seditious graffiti was visible not only to ordinary Leningraders but also to foreign tourists strolling through

the center of the ancient city. The inscription could also be seen from the upper floors of the "Big House," the Leningrad KGB headquarters on Liteiny Prospekt, where 23-year-old Vladimir Putin was starting his service at the time. Some KGB officers were hastily painting over and covering the inscription that morning—reportedly using boards from a nearby coffin workshop.

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Peter and Paul Fortress, while others were searching for the perpetrators of sedition. Volkov and Rybakov were identified fairly quickly, and soon their homes were searched. It was the report of one of these searches that lay unnoticed for many years in a St. Petersburg museum. Among the employees conducting the search, a "Lieutenant Putin" is mentioned in small handwriting—that is, the future president of Russia, who then wore the rank of lieutenant. Volkov and Rybakov were ultimately sentenced to harsh prison terms. The Kremlin, neither before nor after this museum discovery, has confirmed the fact that Putin personally participated in the persecution.

campaigns against dissidents.

This experience in the formation of Putin's personality cannot be underestimated. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, many of his then KGB comrades were engaged in the fight against dissidents in one form or another. Putin was literally surrounded by sedition fighters. Yakunin kept an eye on diplomats at the UN, Grigoriev on priests. There was another person close to Putin who built a career on the fight against dissent. This was the now deceased Viktor Cherkesov. He was older than Putin -

and by age (by two years), and in the KGB hierarchy. Cher-

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In the early 80s, Kesov worked in Leningrad as an investigator43 on cases of anti-Soviet activities.
sti - in other words, he hunted dissidents
and sent them to prison, or even to forced psychiatric treatment. In this role, Cherkesov demonstrated considerable zeal; even his appearance matched the image of an investigator—his face seemed to always express mistrust of everyone around him. In 1983, Cherkesov arrested the renowned Soviet philologist Mikhail Meilakh. For what? Because Meilakh had distributed among his acquaintances Alexander Solzhenitsyn's book, The Gulag Archipelago, published abroad. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of such criminal cases in the Soviet Union. But Meilakh's story stands out from the crowd thanks to the figure of Cherkesov. The fact is that the then young KGB officer had a secret passion—

He loved to write. In 1985, Cherkesov, under a pseudonym, published an essay, "Quiet Saboteurs," in the magazine Zvezda.44 This never-before-cited article, which we discovered in a St. Petersburg library, gives an idea of how Putin and his closest KGB colleagues reasoned at the time.

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“…What did he do?” the author wrote about the arrested Meilakh. “ He *simply distributed books and magazines published abroad… But what did these dozens of books and magazines in glossy, colorful covers bearing the stamps of publishers from London, New York, Tel Aviv, and Munich call for, what did they teach? They called for a struggle specifically for the overthrow of the Soviet system. They called for stopping at nothing. They slandered, provoked, intimidated, and seduced. This was a weapon from the same sabotage arsenal of the enemy camp that had launched a crusade against our country and the entire socialist world. And this weapon was chosen and used against us for a reason. Of course. The USSR is the most well-read country in the world.”* Meylakh would ultimately receive seven years in a labor camp, nearly die in prison from peritonitis, and would only be released in 1987 due to perestroika.

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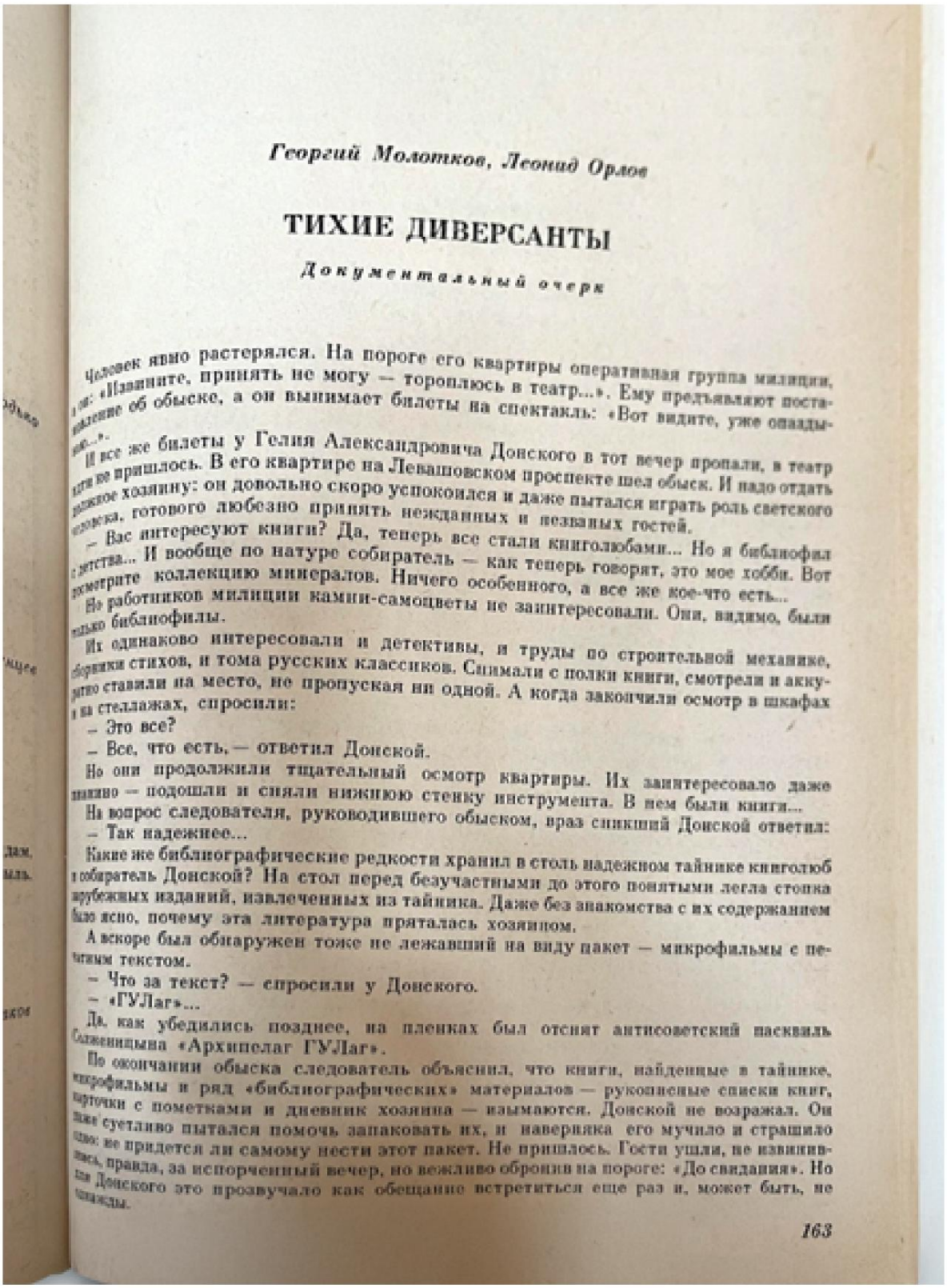

Георгий Молотков, Леонид Орлов

ТИХИЕ ДИВЕРСАНТЫ

Документальный очерк

Человек явно растерялся. На пороге его квартиры оперативная группа милиции, и он: «Извините, принять не могу — тороплюсь в театр...». Ему предъявляют постановление об обыске, а он вынимает билеты на спектакль: «Вот видите, уже опаздываю...».

И все же билеты у Гелия Александровича Донского в тот вечер пропали, в театр идти не пришлось. В его квартире на Левашовском проспекте шел обыск. И надо отдать должное хозяину: он довольно скоро успокоился и даже пытался играть роль светского человека, готового любезно принять нежданных и незваных гостей.

— Вас интересуют книги? Да, теперь все стали книголюбами... Но я библиофил с детства... И вообще по натуре собиратель — как теперь говорят, это мое хобби. Вот посмотрите коллекцию минералов. Ничего особенного, а все же кое-что есть...

Но работников милиции камни-самоцветы не заинтересовали. Они, видимо, были только библиофилы.

Их одинаково интересовали и детективы, и труды по строительной механике, сборники стихов, и тома русских классиков. Снимали с полки книги, смотрели и аккуратно ставили на место, не пропуская ни одной. А когда закончили осмотр в шкафах и на стеллажах, спросили:

— Это все?

— Все, что есть, — ответил Донской.

Но они продолжили тщательный осмотр квартиры. Их заинтересовало даже пианино — подошли и сняли нижнюю стенку инструмента. В нем были книги...

На вопрос следователя, руководившего обыском, враз сникший Донской ответил:

— Так надежнее...

Какие же библиографические редкости хранил в столь надежном тайнике книголюб и собиратель Донской? На стол перед безучастными до этого понятыми легла стопка зарубежных изданий, извлеченных из тайника. Даже без знакомства с их содержанием было ясно, почему эта литература пряталась хозяином.

А вскоре был обнаружен тоже не лежавший на виду пакет — микрофильмы с печатным текстом.

— Что за текст? — спросили у Донского.

— «ГУЛаг»...

Да, как убедились позднее, на пленках был отснят антисоветский пасквиль Солженицына «Архипелаг ГУЛаг».

По окончании обыска следователь объяснил, что книги, найденные в тайнике, микрофильмы и ряд «библиографических» материалов — рукописные списки книг, карточки с пометками и дневник хозяина — изымаются. Донской не возражал. Он даже суетливо пытался помочь запаковать их, и наверняка его мучило и страшило одно: не придется ли самому нести этот пакет. Не пришлось. Гости ушли, не извинившись, правда, за испорченный вечер, но вежливо обронив на пороге: «До свидания». Но для Донского это прозвучало как обещание встретиться еще раз и, может быть, не однажды.

Zvezda magazine, 1985

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From this example, we understand that Putin, his friends, and colleagues viewed dissidents as enemies deserving harsh punishment. Putin was also most likely at the religious procession in the Leningrad church to keep an eye on dissidents—both real and imagined. None of this stopped him from seemingly finding God in the 1990s, when communism collapsed. As he later recounted, in 1993, his mother gave him a cross—the very one he had been baptized with—for Putin to bless in Jerusalem. The future president was then working in the St. Petersburg mayor's office and was traveling to Israel for the first time in his life, as part of an official delegation. After blessing the cross, Putin, as he himself said, never took it off. In topless photographs of the president, later distributed by the Kremlin for PR purposes, a simple cross on a thin chain is always visible around his neck. This is, so to speak, the official version of the “meeting with God”, told by Putin himself.

It's likely, however, that the future president "found God" under other, rather interesting, circumstances. Our interlocutor, who knew Putin from his work in St. Petersburg in the 1990s, tells the following story:

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History. The summer of 1996—a time that has been discussed many times before. Sobchak, having lost the support of President Yeltsin, lost the mayoral election in St. Petersburg and was left without a job. His deputy, Putin, was also left without a job. The Prosecutor General's Office, headed by the amorous Yuri Skuratov, was investigating violations in the St. Petersburg mayor's office, and at some point, a team of Moscow investigators landed in St. Petersburg. Fearing legal trouble, Putin temporarily fled his hometown, our source says. Where? To Valaam Island in Lake Ladoga, approximately 150 kilometers north of St. Petersburg. This picturesque spot has been home to an Orthodox monastery, one of the most famous in Russia, since at least the 15th century. In the 1990s, the monastery was in a deplorable state. The island was shared with the monks by the families of exiled disabled veterans of World War II, whom the Soviet government had brutally evicted from large cities so that they would not spoil the prosperous picture of communist life. "Right in the monastery lived completely declassed families of former exiles: drunkenness, poverty, devastation," a ruler recalled in the 1990s.

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Orthodox businessman Ilya Yurov, who supported Valaam with money.46 It was in the monastery in July 1996 that Putin, having fled from St. Petersburg, settled for several days, our interlocutor asserts. This story may well be an apocrypha :47 it literally copies the legends of ancient tsars who miraculously escaped in church monasteries (for example, Peter the Great in the 17th century hid from the rebellious Streltsy in the Trinity-Sergius Monastery). However, much does indeed suggest that Putin has had a very close, almost mystical connection with Valaam since then. After becoming president, Putin began visiting Valaam every year, at about the same time - in the middle of summer, the same time when he supposedly hid in a cell from investigators. On the territory

A special hermitage was even built for the president at the monastery—a place where Putin stays during his visits. A church dedicated to the holy ancient Russian prince Vladimir and the martyr Ludmila of Bohemia was also opened there in 2008. Parishioners quickly realized that the church was actually dedicated to Vladimir Putin and his wife, Ludmila. Putin's friends weren't far behind—they bought up

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Vast tracts of land near the Karelian town of Lakhdenpokhya, right across from the island of Valaam. Putin also stayed there during his visits to the monastery. Finally, it was at Valaam Monastery that Monk Methodius (secular name Venko Petkov), especially revered by Putin and his entourage, served since the 1990s. This monk became famous for the fact that in 2012, when Putin had just returned to the presidency and joyfully visited Valaam once again, he rushed to kiss the Russian leader's hand. Such a gesture towards

"The Orthodox Church doesn't accept the laity," Yurov recalls with bewilderment. Putin withdrew his hand back then, but he didn't stop venerating Methodius. When the monk died of COVID-19 in 2021, Putin visited his grave. In short, Valaam, it seems, truly played an important role in Putin's relationship with the faith.

Regardless of how sincerely Putin believed in God at the beginning of his political career, he understood the role of the church in achieving political gain from the first day of his rule. Even a little earlier. On the evening of December 31, 1999, the decrepit Boris Yeltsin announced his

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Putin's early resignation and appointment as acting president effectively launched the transformation of the recent state security officer into the Russian tsar. However, few remember that on the morning of that same day, when the country was still uncertain about its future, an interesting meeting took place in Yeltsin's Kremlin office. The outgoing president summoned Putin and then-Patriarch Alexy II, agent "Drozdov." Thus, in the presence of the high priest, Yeltsin informed his successor of the transfer of power. In other words, Putin was anointed king even before the election.

All this was necessary to imbue his rise to power with a sacred significance—literally, like that of the real Russian tsars of the past. Putin would later employ this ritual himself, when he temporarily ceded the throne to Dmitry Medvedev and then reclaimed it. An eyewitness told us that in March 2012, a day after the presidential elections that began Vladimir Putin's third term, a private meeting took place at the Vysota 2320 restaurant in Sochi between Putin, Medvedev, and the new patriarch, Kirill, aka "Mikhailov."48

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The patriarch's secretive manner in which he blessed Putin to rule is also revealing. In today's Russia, unlike in many countries, the state deliberately distances itself from God in public life: neither the president during his inauguration, nor judges or witnesses in court proceedings—no one, anywhere, ever takes an oath on the Bible or any other sacred scripture.

When Yeltsin handed over power to Putin in 1999, in the presence of Alexei "Drozdov," Alexander Grigoriev, a friend and colleague of the latter two, was already very high in the court hierarchy. In 1998, Putin appointed Grigoriev deputy director of the FSB, and in 2001, head of Rosrezerv, a secret agency responsible for the country's strategic reserves in case of wars and cataclysms. This is an extremely wealthy and closed structure, where corruption and cronyism flourish, costing Russia billions in losses. Everything looked, again, like with the rulers of the past: having received power, the sovereign distributed tasty morsels of the kingdom to his loyal vassals - for feeding. In rewarding Grigoriev, Putin did not limit himself to Rosrezerv. In the first years of his presidency, Grigoriev's young daughter

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Olga Goryeva, who at the time was only interested in social entertainment, received significant shares in huge construction companies associated with Putin.49 Olga had neither savings nor business experience; her father had served as an officer his entire life and could not have legally earned the millions of dollars to buy these shares.

So we come to another important concept: what does *loyalty* mean at Putin's court? Is he loyal to his friends, are they loyal to him, are the people in Putin's circle loyal to all the principles they speak about publicly? The words "faith" and "faith"

The words "nost" in Russian stem from the same root. At first, it might seem that while Putin's faith may not be deep, his loyalty is absolute. Grigoriev was far from the only one whom the new tsar immediately bestowed upon the throne—

positions and gifts. Whether this loyalty will stand the test of time, we will examine further, but for now, let's tell you how the fates of the heroes mentioned here unfolded.

Grigoriev, having taken over as head of Rosrezerv, never rose any higher in his career. In 2008, he died suddenly—according to one

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According to one of the versions, it was due to alcohol problems.50 Grigoriev was under severe stress in the last week of his life: five days before his death, his former agent, Patriarch Alexy II, aka "Drozdov," died. And a month and a half after Grigoriev's death, the new head of the Russian Orthodox Church—partly due to the Kremlin's interference in internal church affairs—

Another former KGB informant, Kirill, aka "Mikhailov," will become the next president. Under him, the Russian Orthodox Church will finally become a tool of the Kremlin, plagued by the same vices as the Tsar's court. Grigoriev will be buried with honors at the Serafimovskoye Cemetery in St. Petersburg, next to the graves of Vladimir and Maria Putin, the parents of his KGB companion. Olga Grigorieva will lose her shares in the business after her father's death, but will undoubtedly remain a very wealthy person. Yuli Rybakov is one of the artists whom the young KGB officer Vladimir Putin

sent to prison, - eventually became the leader of the democratic movement, a consistent critic of Putin.

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A rare photograph from the early 2000s from Yuli Rybakov's personal archive. Rybakov, then a State Duma deputy, is trying to convey a message to President Putin. Putin's facial expressions are quite telling.

Finally, Viktor Cherkesov's fate would prove tragic in its own way. One day, he would pick up his pen again to write an article—this time, no longer under a pseudonym, and with far greater consequences for himself. Cherkesov's last article...

The owl and his entire fascinating career will be a separate topic in subsequent chapters.

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2. Venison cutlets

How the Yeltsin family handed over power to Putin and his friends

If we were to describe the transfer of power from Yeltsin to Putin in one adjective, it would be "behind the scenes." In this book, we will return to the events of 1999–2000 several times: although many of them

Some have already been well described by researchers and those directly involved, some have never been publicly discussed, and others—perhaps the most dramatic events of that period—remain entirely unsolved. But all of these events share one thing in common: Putin came to power through behind-the-scenes deals and secret decisions, not through democratic procedures, but by the will of a limited group of people—"Byzantine style," as they say, meaning that power in Russia is based on intrigue, as in the late Roman Empire.

The basic chronology of those days is well known. Having successfully acquitted himself in the assassination of Yuri Skuratov, the young FSB director, Vladimir Putin, became Yeltsin's successor in the summer of 1999.

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Putin's "family"—Valentin Yumashev, Tatyana Dyachenko, Boris Berezovsky, and another prominent businessman of the time, Sergei Pugachev, whose story we'll explore later—was lobbying for him. By August 1999, Putin knew he would soon become, if not president, then at least a presidential candidate.

In August, Yeltsin appointed Putin as Prime Minister of Russia, that is, the second person in the country, handling almost all affairs in place of the ailing president.

In August-September 1999, a new war began in the Caucasus: the Russian army entered Chechnya, which at that time, although part of the Russian Federation, was de facto independent of Moscow. The fighting was generally favorable for the Kremlin: Chechen units were driven into the mountains, where they would be destroyed over the next several years. Prime Minister Putin's approval ratings rose steadily on the wave of military victories.

In mid-December, elections to the parliament are held. lament, in which the second place after the communists is occupied by the recently created with the participation of

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The Kremlin's Unity movement. Unity would soon merge with the third-place Fatherland-All Russia party, under the common name United Russia. The united party would control the majority of seats in the State Duma and consistently support Putin. On December 31, 1999, after a meeting with Patriarch Alexy and Putin, Yeltsin announced his early

resignation and appointed the prime minister as acting president. This played a decisive role in his successor's victory in the March 2000 elections.

However, behind the general outline of events there remain Important questions, the answers to which remain unclear. *What role did the FSB play in Putin's rise to power? Why did the Chechen war begin? What agreements were reached between Putin and Yeltsin's "family"?*

We don't know the answers to these questions, because most decisions regarding the transition of power were made *behind the scenes.* But we can tell you how this theater was organized.

It's the very beginning of 2000. Vladimir Putin has just received the royal decree from Boris Yeltsin.

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A New Year's gift—to the entire country. Now the 47-year-old intelligence officer decided to reciprocate the gallantry. He invited Yeltsin's "family" to his property—Komsomolskoye Lake near St. Petersburg, where Putin and his friends built their dacha village, "Ozero," in 1996. Of course, in early 2000, the acting president could have afforded to meet with guests not at an ordinary dacha, but at any of the opulent state residences, and Putin would certainly have preferred to remain in Moscow rather than venture into the Baltic forests. The fact that he invited the "family" to "Ozero" specifically is a sign of the place's importance to Putin. And what is "Ozero"? It's a circle of Putin's close friends who settled there just as their leader began his march on Moscow. It is therefore time to introduce the key members of Putin's inner circle, whose names will be mentioned extensively in this book.

But first, let's note a symbolic detail. As one of the three people who told us about the meeting at "Ozero" recalls, it took place on Old New Year, from January 13th to 14th. It was on this paradoxical holiday, symbolizing

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In a move that was either a renewal or a revenge of the past, the new ruler invited the "family" of the old ruler. There was another symbolic element, too. Two members of the "family" who attended that party—including Valentin Yumashev, then the boyfriend of the ex-president's daughter and the most influential courtier of the late Yeltsin period—insist that it was a personal, friendly invitation, with no hidden meaning, just "to have a family get-together."51 Although this phrase sounds ambiguous coming from members of Yeltsin's "family," it was meant that both Yumashev and, for example, the head of the presidential administration, Alexander Voloshin, came to Putin's dacha with their loved ones, with their children. Putin was also with his family. But not only that. It was one of those parties where guests arrive to find a house full of strangers, friends of the host. Putin brought his people. Vladimir Yakunin, one of those present at the celebration

For his part, he perceives those gatherings in a clear-cut manner: the meeting was of a business nature; Putin, who became his successor, wanted to introduce Yeltsin's "family" to his inner circle, to those whom the new Russian tsar had chosen as his assistants,

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Advisors, vassals. "They *(Yeltsin's side – author's note)* were pleased with the meeting," Yakunin told us.

Yakunin had no reason to complain either: he would soon rise through the ranks. He would become Deputy Minister of Transport, and by 2005, head of one of the country's largest state-owned enterprises, Russian Railways. But on January 13, 2000, Yakunin had only one cause for annoyance: the secret services were trampling bushes across his property as they ran wires for the presidential "vertushka" (helicopter) to Putin's dacha. This was a special secure government telephone used in the USSR and Russia. An official's possession of a "vertushka" (helicopter) was a sign of his high rank. In the 1990s, Russians learned from the news that the same word had another slang meaning—it was the name for the helicopters that participated, and often perished, in the Caucasian wars. Another such war was unfolding in Chechnya just as Yeltsin's "family" was celebrating Old New Year with Putin's family and friends. Therefore, it was imperative to establish a secure line of communication with the commander-in-chief at his dacha. This...

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A telling detail. Time will pass, Putin will have many dachas, palaces, and country estates, and everywhere, even his temporary residences, will be equipped with special communications and a "turntable." For now, they're just laying a temporary line to a simple dacha near St. Petersburg. Putin hasn't yet become, but he's already becoming, the master of Russia.

Shares of Russia soon began to go to his friends who came to visit for Old New Year. Among them was Yakunin, who brought along some "game cutlets, apparently venison," prepared by his wife (as you would later learn, game played a significant role not only at the start of Yakunin's great career, but also at its demise). The Kovalchuk brothers were also at the party: the elder Mikhail and the younger Yuri, physicists by training, who in the 1990s, thanks to Putin, became the owners of Bank Rossiya. One of the Fursenko brothers was there, or perhaps both: the elder Andrei and the younger Sergei, also from the exact sciences (one a mathematician and physicist, the other a radio engineer) and also residents of the Ozero cooperative. There were certainly other guests, but our interlocutors did not name them.

either they didn't remember after so many years, or they didn't want to

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spread. But even from the names that were mentioned, one peculiarity is noticeable: at the time of the dacha
At the meeting, Putin's friends held minor positions, deputy minister at most, or were regional power brokers; Yeltsin's "family" didn't know them and would hardly have met them in everyday life. But soon after that conversation over cutlets, all of Putin's friends would skyrocket to new positions and wealth. So Yakunin is probably right when he calls that meeting a "viewing" of Putin's trusted confidants.

In general, the circle of Putin's closest friends,
Those who began their rapid rise then can be roughly divided into three groups. The first are Putin's colleagues, subordinates, and business partners from his time in the St. Petersburg mayor's office in the 1990s. Let's call this group the "Petersburgers." This term, however, must be used with caution: in a broad sense, "Petersburgers" in modern Russia refers to all of Putin's protégés who moved to Moscow from St. Petersburg.

and among them, many belong to other groups.

The second group—let's call it the "Chekists"—are those who followed Putin from his former position.

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work, from the KGB and the FSB, as the main Russian intelligence service began to be called since 1995. "Chekists" -
These include, for example, the already familiar "Father Alexander" Grigoriev and the graphomaniac investigator Viktor Cherkesov. Finally, the

third group is his sports friends, namely judo and sambo, which Putin has been practicing since 1964. In other words, these are Putin's buddies from the earliest period of his life. We will nevertheless call this group "bandits." The fact is that athletes, primarily wrestlers and boxers, formed the backbone of spontaneously emerging criminal groups in Russia in the 1980s and 1990s. Putin's athlete friends are no exception: in the 1980s and 1990s,

They engaged in shady dealings, and after their partner in the tatami came to power, they extended their previous methods to big business nationwide. Raiding, intimidation, and "aggressive takeovers"—all these words apply to members of the third group of Putin's friends.

Of course, among Putin's friends there were those who were members of several groups at once: some

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The "St. Petersburgers" were "Chekists," while the others were "bandits," not to mention that, in the broadest sense, they were all bandits. It's curious, however, that Putin—at least at first—didn't mix his social circles. The "Chekists," the "bandits," and the "St. Petersburgers" interacted with Putin and built their careers without much overlap. Of course, over time, all three groups would intermingle to some extent, becoming partners in various ventures and even intermarrying their children. But it's important to note that back then, in January 2000, Putin prudently didn't bring either the "bandits" or the "Chekists" to a meeting with distinguished guests from Moscow. He invited St. Petersburg intellectuals, physicists. Even the Chekist Yakunin passed for a physicist: he was a rocket engineer by education, and in the 80s, on behalf of the KGB, he supervised the Leningrad Physical-Technical Institute named after Abram Ioffe - overseeing

a wave of students during their international internships. Limiting himself to the most intelligent part of his circle was a very sensible, politically calculated decision on Putin's part. Back in 2000, even after the appointment

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As acting president, Putin likely didn't feel as confident as he did years later. His future career wasn't yet entirely clear to the former intelligence officer, and he had every reason to be worried about it.

In the book “From” published in the same year 2000 "The First Person" contains an interesting recollection from Putin's old friend, the aforementioned Sergei Roldugin. In his youth, he asked his friend what exactly his job in the KGB entailed. He replied, "I'm a specialist in communicating with people." This is probably true, and Putin is a good judge of character, but Putin certainly thinks of himself that way. He structured his interactions with his friends so that, at first, there were no conflicts or even unnecessary interactions between them. But only at first.

The Kovalchuk brothers are the backbone of the "St. Petersburg" group. Their names will be repeated often in this the book in obvious and unexpected places - so varied is their participation in the life of Putin's court. For now, let's give their portraits in broad strokes. Both brothers are a little older than Putin.
Tina, they come from a Leningrad family

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Scientists. Their father, a historian of Ukrainian descent, made a career studying the history of the USSR. Their mother, a scholar of Jewish descent, taught the history of the CPSU, a pointless but mandatory subject in Soviet times. The Fursenko brothers are practically "twins" of the Kovalchuks.

Andrei and Sergei were also born into the family of a prominent Leningrad historian, Academician Alexander Fursenko, one of the leading Soviet Americanists. In fact, the Kovalchuk and Fursenko brothers spent their entire lives until 2000 either together or along very similar paths. Their fathers sat in adjacent offices at the Leningrad branch of the Academy of Sciences. Both fathers were members of the Communist Party, the elder Kovalchuk more of a dogmatist, and the Fursenko father a "cosmopolitan." According to a former colleague, "he understood everything bad about the Soviet Union," including because he had the opportunity to travel to the West back in the 1960s.53 Fursenko Sr. is generally remembered as a bon vivant: he dressed elegantly, not in the Soviet style, was keen on alpine skiing, which is not a proletarian sport at all, was stately, knew how to joke, and made people fall in love with him.

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those around him. At the same time, the views of the older generation of Fursenkos and Kovalchuks didn't always fit into the official doctrine. Valentin Kovalchuk authored works on the siege of Leningrad. Among other things, he insisted on a higher than official figure for the famine's victims. For this, Kovalchuk was criticized by the CPSU leadership, but he did not retract his estimate of 800,000 dead city residents. Alexander Fursenko, in turn, authored a major work on the relations between the USSR and the United States during the Cuban Missile Crisis, a work recognized as authoritative not only in Russia but also in the West. Both topics—the confrontation with the Unite The Leningrad Siege—and the events surrounding it —will be very close to Putin's heart. As is well known, one of the victims of the Siege was the older brother of the then-unborn Russian president, two-year-old Vitya Putin, who died of illness in a boarding school in 1942 (during the Siege, weakened children were sometimes taken from their families and placed in special institutions). Putin's father was seriously wounded during the defense of Leningrad, and his mother, who spent much of the Siege in the besieged city, suffered ill health there and nearly died.

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Vladimir and Maria, parents of President Putin
kremlin.ru

And the fight against the US has been the core of Putin's rhetoric for a large part of his reign. Could the views of the Kovalchuks and Fursenkos, both senior and junior, have influenced Putin's outlook? Definitely yes. Many of our interlocutors described Yuri Kovalchuk as Putin's closest advisor on a wide range of issues, from politics to culture. Some of our sources called Kovalchuk a "consigliere," like a trusted confidant of the mafia godfather. He's so close

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Putin, who at the beginning of his reign was the only courtier who allowed himself to address the president informally, and once, at a public event, didn't hesitate to take a cutlet out of Putin's plate with a fork (as a joke, not because he was so hungry).54 Putin never reprimanded Kovalchuk, which speaks volumes about their relationship. Over the years, Kovalchuk began to address the president more formally as "Vladimir Vladimirovich," but their closeness only grew stronger. For example, almost every time Putin went on vacation to his Black Sea residence in Sochi in the summer, Kovalchuk would go there too—to be close to the president even on vacation. For this purpose, Kovalchuk built himself an expensive house near Gelendzhik, on the Black Sea Riviera—it stands roughly midway between Putin's state residence in Sochi and Putin's secret palace on Cape Idokopas. Perhaps this was even the calculation: so that the "consigliere" could reach the "godfather" equally quickly, no matter where he had to go. When Putin dives underwater in a bathyscaphe for PR purposes, a member of the Kovalchuk family will be right there with him. Everyone

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Three times, when the Russian president descended to the seabed (twice in the Gulf of Finland and once off the coast of Crimea), a man with the forgettable name of Sergei Fokin sat at the helm of the bathyscaphe. He is the great-nephew of Yuri Kovalchuk, a fact that state media, naturally, did not report.

According to our interlocutors, Yuri Kovalchuk, half-Ukrainian, was one of those who turned Putin against the neighboring country.

In private, he's generally quite abrupt, telling vulgar jokes and making jokes that border on and beyond the pale, especially fond of obscene remarks about gays. It was Kovalchuk who, in one of his speeches in 2011, suggested Putin compare opposition symbols to condoms. As we've already discussed, that period was the only one in Putin's reign when his power seemed to be wavering under the pressure of popular resistance. The protesters chose small white ribbons as their insignia. These ribbons inspired Kovalchuk, and then Putin, to think about condoms.55 Yuri's older brother, Mikhail, now heads the Kurchatov Institute, Russia's leading

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center for the study of atomic energy. Unlike Yuri, who in his entire career only gave a couple

In carefully edited interviews on state television, Mikhail is a public figure. He regularly shares his thoughts on the world order, which can be used to imagine the ideas that circulate in this family. For example, in 2015, Mikhail Kovalchuk accused the United States of developing a "genetically modified human" designed to

It is impossible to destroy other states with the help of "ideas that contradict the natural." Kovalchuk included childless families and LGBTQ people among these ideas.

Despite Mikhail Kovalchuk's obvious obscurantism, he, along with another participant in the January 2000 party, Andrei Fursenko, became a figure who determined the development of all Russian science. From 2004 to 2012, Fursenko served as Russia's Minister of Education, and later as an aide to President Putin, also on issues related to education and science. Together with Mikhail Kovalchuk, Fursenko initiated a large-scale reform of the Russian Academy of Sciences, attempting, among other things, to deprive academicians of the unauthorized

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dependence. Kovalchuk, as journalists wrote, was supposed to become president of the renewed Academy.56 However, in 2013, when all this was happening, the academicians managed to vote Kovalchuk out and temporarily defend themselves. In retaliation, the Academy was punished like a disobedient child in the following years: its independence, property, and generous state funding were taken away.

Finally, Sergei Fursenko, Andrey's younger brother, spent a significant portion of his career under Putin in football. Or rather, in football management, a game incredibly popular in Russia. Over the years, Fursenko served as the head of the Russian Football Union, the St. Petersburg club Zenit, and as a member of the UEFA Executive Committee representing Russia. At the same time, Sergei held various positions in the state-owned gas business (he was a top manager at Gazprom and Gazprombank) and played a significant role in President Putin's PR efforts. Overall, Sergei, as one of his acquaintances put it, was always the Fursenko "whom nature had a rest on."

in the sense that he is inferior to his older brother in intelligence and influence57.

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As already mentioned, in January 2000, at the time of the celebratory dinner with venison cutlets, Putin's friends were not particularly prominent people. Only Yakunin was working as a government official at the time, and even then, he occupied a low-status post. Both Fursenkos held unimportant positions in St. Petersburg. Mikhail Kovalchuk worked at the Institute of Crystallography, and Yuri was a banker, but at the regional level. However, within a few years, they would all make a colossal leap in their careers and wealth. Bank Rossiya, which his friends from the Ozero cooperative had privatized in the early 1990s, began expanding into Moscow as soon as Putin was first elected president. With his help, the bank began rapidly accumulating assets. It swelled primarily at the expense of companies that had previously...

belonging to the state gas monopoly Gazprom—in other words, Rossiya received the assets that the president had been in control of. We will discuss in detail how Rossiya and Putin grew rich in the relevant chapter, but for now we will share a revealing detail. Under Putin, the once provincial bank, which had greatly lost

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Having fallen to its major competitors, Rossiya Bank not only grew to gargantuan proportions but also received a valuable gift from the state. Rossiya Bank began servicing Russians' utility bills—heating, gas, electricity, and water. This guaranteed income, and, importantly, Rossiya Bank charges the highest commission of all its competitors—up to 2.5% of the bill (compared to an average of 0.4%). It's worth noting that Rossiya Bank was given the opportunity to service the country's wealthiest and most densely populated regions—Moscow, St. Petersburg, and their metropolitan areas. Over time, Rossiya Bank's annual income from these payments alone will reach approximately $23 million.

So, in 2000, Putin wasn't the only one to come to power. Following him, gradually but nonetheless quickly, new Putinist nobles rose to key positions in the state, including those who dined on venison cutlets in the company of the old Yeltsin-era nobles. Yakunin calls that group of Putin's friends from the Ozero cooperative a "kibbutz," implying that they were united not only by their shared work but also by their shared life outside of work. They were loyal to each other then.

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3. Vodka, cigarettes and other earthly blessings

How the President's Friends Became
Devout Believers

In northwestern Russia, on an island in Lake Onega, two stunningly beautiful wooden churches have stood since the early 18th century. They are colloquially known as Kizhi, after the island on which they stand. Kizhi is one of Russia's main attractions. Thousands of tourists come here every year, including foreigners brought to Lake Onega on cruise ships from St. Petersburg. Tourists are drawn by a beautiful legend: according to tradition, the Church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, the main church on the island, was built without a single nail. The legend is profitable. Tourists leave considerable money in Kizhi every year, spending it on church souvenirs, icons, candles, and the like. Who benefits from this money? Initially, the churches in Kizhi, like thousands of other churches in Russia, were considered parish churches, meaning they were run by laypeople who, at their own expense,

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Contributions were collected and religious buildings erected. Under Soviet rule, parishioners, naturally, had no control over anything—churches were either demolished or converted: at best (as in Kizhi) into museums, at worst, into cowsheds and barns. The 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed, became a time of challenges for the Orthodox Church. On the one hand, the state not only stopped restricting believers but also decided to return a huge number of valuable assets—churches and other real estate, as well as valuable relics—to the Church. On the other hand, the Church was still unclear about how to manage all this. The rights of parishioners, whose ancestors had once chipped in to build thousands of churches across Russia, were no longer considered. The state found it more convenient to deal not with the millions of church "shareholders," but with a single organization, which became the Moscow Patriarchate, the head office of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Patriarchate, however, allowed for relative democracy in matters of property (and in other matters as well) until the early 2000s. Financial matters of the parishes were handled by

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Bishoprics—local branches of the Russian Orthodox Church headed by the patriarch's viceroys—were disappearing. The election of Vladimir Putin as president in 2000 launched the transformation of not only the entire country but also the Church within it into a centralized autocracy.

In the same year 2000, Patriarch Alexy II, unnoticed by the secular public, carried out the first church reforms that strengthened his sole authority. Specifically, he abolished the regular Local Councils—previously the highest authority in the Russian Orthodox Church, in which priests from across the country were represented. Now, all church affairs were overseen by a narrower Bishops' Council, where only the highest hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church sat. At the same time, local branches of the Russian Orthodox Church—bishoprics and those under

The parishes that belonged to them lost the right to manage their property. Alexy II then became interested in the income of wealthy churches, like those on the island in Lake Onega. In 2003, Kizhi, like many other wealthy parishes, began to be called "patriarchal metochion." In short, this means that money earned from donations, candles, souvenirs, and church services (funerals, weddings, and others) is now

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They went not to the local diocese, but directly to the patriarchate.59 The scale of income from church goods and services should not be underestimated. Prominent church historian Nikolai Mitrokhin estimated the annual income of the Russian Orthodox Church in the mid-2000s at approximately half a billion dollars; according to journalists,60 a wealthy parish could earn up to three million rubles a month.

It is by no means a coincidence that Putin and Alexy II simultaneously began to build autocratic regimes, one in the country, the other -
in the church. As already mentioned, under the Soviet Union, Alexy, likely under the supervision of the KGB, was in charge of the Orthodox Church's property and foreign affairs. When communism fell and the beginnings of capitalism appeared in Russia, the church, headed by Alexy, found itself in an interesting business: it became involved in commerce. In the mid-1990s, the Russian Orthodox Church earned money by importing a whole list of goods into Russia duty-free. At first, these were oil and chicken legs, and later, cigarettes and alcohol, addictions to which no church should, it would seem, encourage. The scheme was structured like this. The government of the time...

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gave a number of organizations the right to import high-demand goods into Russia duty-free, selling them domestically at commercial prices. Profits from these transactions were to go toward socially beneficial and charitable causes. In addition to the Russian Orthodox Church, which was supposed to use profits to restore churches and similar projects, the list of privileged exporters included, for example, the National Sports Fund (supposed to support athletes) and the Afghanistan War Disabled Fund (supposed to support veterans). Journalists later reliably established61 that at least some of the money went to private entities, often with mafia ties. The budget losses from this practice are difficult to even imagine. For example, each pack of cigarettes, after paying customs duties and value-added tax, would have cost exporters 50% more than it cost the church. As journalists calculated at the time, the Russian Orthodox Church could have imported 60,000 tons of cigarettes into the country between 1994 and 1996.62 If we take into account the average weight of one cigarette pack of approximately 22 grams, it turns out that the church sold about

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50 billion cigarettes. No one ever properly investigated how the Russian Orthodox Church spent the enormous profits from these deals. By 1997, the authorities, struggling with a budget deficit, denied privileged importers their benefits. Despite the fact that the church's activities then became the subject of journalistic investigations, no one was punished. At the center of the story was the future Patriarch Kirill, aka "Mikhailov"—he then headed the very division of the Russian Orthodox Church that handled cigarette and alcohol transactions.

The church's love of money taught Putin's inner circle an important lesson. The "Petersburgers," "Chekists," and "bandits," most of them avowed atheists, saw that believing in God was now profitable both politically and financially.

meaning.

Once a year, a "miracle" occurs in Jerusalem. On the eve of Orthodox Easter (exclusively!), a "holy fire" supposedly ignites in the Edicule of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, symbolizing the resurrected Christ, by the will of the Holy Spirit. Until recently, only those authorized to witness knew what was actually happening inside the darkened chamber.

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Orthodox high priests do this. However, in 2018, one of the holy fathers confessed to a Greek journalist that he lights the flame himself with a lighter, and not God through His providence (believers tried to dispute this revelation, but a Greek court ruled that everything said was true).63 Nevertheless, the "Holy Fire" is venerated by millions of Orthodox Christians in the Middle East, Eastern and Southern Europe, and the largest flock is in Russia. For centuries, this ritual was simply an interesting anecdote in the long-standing confrontation between Eastern and Western Christian denominations, but thanks to Putin and his friends, this medieval notion

has been transformed into big politics. In 2003, Yakunin and Cherkesov, Putin's aforementioned friends from the KGB and Leningrad, took up the matter. They joined the leadership of the St. Andrew the First-Called Foundation, an opaque and wealthy charitable organization that organized the delivery of the "miracle" to Russia. The ceremony seems outlandish: a Russian delegation led by Yakunin flies to Jerusalem for Easter, receives

there is a fire and in the lamp he carries it back to the special-

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on a privately chartered plane. This is probably the only instance in modern civil aviation where an open flame is carried on board an aircraft—despite safety precautions. One of the businessmen who flew with Yakunin to Jerusalem recalls an almost surreal scene: Yakunin and a group of priests are sitting on the plane with a lit oil lamp, while some of the accompanying officials and businessmen are immediately celebrating Easter with alcoholic libations (drinking alcohol during Holy Week is strictly prohibited for Orthodox Christians).

Upon arrival, the "holy fire" is carried around Cities and villages, and sometimes even neighboring countries where Russia has political interests. All of this is also funded by the St. Andrew the First-Called Foundation. At some point, the foundation has also been bringing other Orthodox relics to Russia—sometimes the Belt of the Virgin Mary, sometimes the relics of venerated saints. And all of this is covered in detail by Russian state media. In short, this miracle fair requires enormous funds.

Where do they come from? It's simple. Funds go to the St. Andrew the First-Called Foundation (hundreds of millions)

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rubles) are being transferred by structures associated with Yakunin, as well as, apparently, the state-owned Russian Railways, which he headed until 2015. Thanks to Putin's patronage, the country's top railway official, during his time at the helm of Russian Railways, built a shadow empire of companies that received state contracts around this gigantic monopoly. In other words, Yakunin and his people were enriching themselves incredibly at state expense, and spent part of their earnings in the political interests of their patron, President Putin. It looks like feudal rent, as medieval as the rite of "descent of the blessed one" itself.

fire."

Putin's other Orthodox friends sought their own "grace." That same year, 2003, the St. Andrew the First-Called Foundation brought the "foot of the Apostle Andrew," which is kept in a monastery on Mount Athos in Greece, to Russia for several weeks. Putin came to venerate the relic, and it became clear: not only the fire from Jerusalem was trending, but also miracles from Mount Athos.

There have always been many legends surrounding this mountain, the number of which is unknown to the Russian authorities.

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They further expanded it to suit their own purposes. According to legend, Athos was formed after a giant of that name threw a huge rock at the god Poseidon. But this place became truly important for Orthodox Christians. According to their beliefs, the mountain became the final resting place of the Virgin Mary—she was sailing to Cyprus, but during a storm she ended up on Athos, which has since been called a holy place. Over time, a village became established here.

Orthodox monks pour and build churches.

Putin's confidants had tried to take him to Mount Athos since the beginning of his reign, but something always got in the way. The president finally arrived there in the fall of 2005. He drove himself, touring the local churches. Then a funny episode occurred, which Russian propaganda turned into a new myth—about Putin's mystical connection with God. As the Russian leader was driving to yet another monastery, a donkey approached his car. The animal ran in front of the presidential car, escorting the guest to his destination. When Putin left the monastery and drove back, the donkey approached the car again. The head of state remained...

was getting better, and for some time they looked at the animal.

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They were raging at each other. Russian propaganda seized on this story because it was on a donkey that Christ, as is well known, rode into Jerusalem. “I think this is some kind of sign from the Mother of God as the patroness of Athos to the president,” one of the Greek clerics later said in an interview with Russian state television.65 The courtiers took action with lightning speed—literally a few days after this visit, the Russian

Athos Society was registered. “There are 12 of us founders,” Russian Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika told journalists. And to the remark that there were the same number of apostles, he added meaningfully: “So it’s half-

"It was counted."

It's difficult to explain why this organization is needed. The Athonite Society doesn't maintain schools or shelters, and doesn't perform any clear charitable function. In fact, it was created for the same very simple purpose—to make money and political gains from religion.

Czech glasses.

Soon the Athonite Society brought the relics of Mary for veneration by Russian believers.

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Magdalene—people lined up in long lines to touch the relic, hoping for a miracle. For some, miracles happened immediately, as this group of Putin's courtiers was popularly nicknamed. The family of Prosecutor General Chaika received government contracts for crushed stone supplies and took over a hotel business and real estate in Greece, not far from Athos, in partnership with criminal elements. Georgy Poltavchenko, both a "St. Petersburger" and a "Chekist" who had once worked with Putin in the KGB, became the head of the Athos Society's board of trustees. After Putin's accession, Poltavchenko quickly rose to prominence, like an Athonite donkey following the president. First, he became the presidential envoy, and later was appointed governor of St. Petersburg. At the same time, strange details came to light: city enterprises of St. Petersburg began to donate money to the Athonite Society, although in words “Athonites” seemed to be

promised to attract funds from private philanthropists. Poltavchenko's son Alexei, like the children of many other Putin courtiers, unexpectedly

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Dan turned out to be a successful businessman. He headed the Russian office of the Greek construction company Aktor SA, which immediately won a tender to build a waste processing plant in a suburb of St. Petersburg. It is unlikely that this commercial success was due to the providence of the Virgin Mary. Even more interesting is the figure of another founder of the Athonite Society,

Poltavchenko's friend Konstantin Goloshchapov. Russian media refer to him as nothing less than "Putin's massage therapist," and acquaintances have nicknamed him "Padre" (in Russian tradition, priests are not addressed this way, so the nickname is clearly humorous and hardly emphasizes a serious attitude toward religion). Goloshchapov belongs to that group of Putin's friends that we called "bandits" above. One of our interlocutors described him this way: "When you meet him, it's immediately clear what he does. Bull's neck, two meters tall, huge fists. Surrounded by gangster-looking guys."66 This man's biography is typical of the president's friends. In Soviet times, Goloshchapov was caught doing "fartsovka" - reselling hard-to-get items - and received a criminal conviction.

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Bridge. A telling detail: the future leader of the Orthodox community made a living by reselling icons. Goloshchapov was also involved in wrestling, which, according to one version, is how he met Putin —he allegedly massaged the future president after an injury.

Goloshchapov (center) with other Leningrad judo veterans. Photo from Nikolai's personal archive.
Vashchilina (left behind Goloshchapov)

Under Putin as President, Goloshchapov began to work closely with Poltavchenko and Arkady Rotenberg, another former “bandit”.

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And, naturally, he became a millionaire: he made money on literally everything, but primarily by trading on his connections with Putin's inner circle. Thanks to them, Goloshchapov ascended to the international stage—he went into the hotel business in Italy and almost bought the Bari football club. The depth of his religious fervor is illustrated by an episode recounted to us by a leading Russian businessman. In the early 2000s, Goloshchapov came to our interlocutor's office to "offer a less-than-favorable deal"—in other words, to take away his business. As he entered, the Padre noticed an ancient icon on the wall and immediately fell to his knees, crossing himself.

The president was rapidly gaining "believers." The photograph below is very telling. It was August 2000, just a few months after Putin's first inauguration. The newly elected head of state traveled to northern Russia to one of the most famous Orthodox monasteries, the Pskov-Pechersky Monastery. A very interesting group gathered in one frame. Two secret service agents stand to the side—

These are Putin's security guards, Yevgeny Zinichev and Alexey

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Dyumin: Years will pass, and the president will appoint them governors.

kremlin.ru

According to media reports, Putin was also accompanied on that trip by Archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov (center), who would soon be called the president's spiritual mentor. We'll return to this figure later, but for now we'll just say that he was for a long time the abbot of the Sretensky Monastery in central Moscow—a place that unites many of the characters in this chapter, primarily because of its location. The monastery is located near the main FSB building. So, "reli-

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It was very convenient for the "geoz" security officers to go to Shevkunov—as they used to joke, to "atone for their sins." In the second half of the 1990s, Putin also visited the monastery—this is likely how the future president met Shevkunov. They clearly liked each other.

But now we'd like to draw your attention to the bearded man on the right. His name is Sergei Pugachev, and he's also a parishioner of the Sretensky Monastery. Just 15 years ago, this man was commonly called an "Orthodox oligarch." Both words in this nickname were justified—he spoke a lot about his religiosity, and Pugachev's fortune in his heyday was estimated at two billion dollars. One contributed to the other: it is generally believed that it was through his connections with the church that Pugachev gained Putin's trust, which, in turn, helped him in business. However, in practice, things were more complicated.

Like Goloshchapov, Pugachev was involved in a business banned in the USSR from an early age – a fifth-grade
As a young man, he bought dollars and Finnish marks from foreigners and sold them on the black market. 68 But his problems with the law began in adulthood.

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age. In 1986, he was convicted of fraud—he borrowed and failed to repay 5,500 rubles (an amount that could have bought a car at the time). However, in the 1990s, this man made a career as a banker and thus met the future president. First, Pugachev established a bank in St. Petersburg, which brought him into contact with the city's leadership, including Putin. Then, almost simultaneously, they moved to Moscow—the banker provided funds for the reconstruction of the Kremlin, which allowed him to collaborate with the Presidential Property Management Department, where Putin had just found a job. Sretensky Monastery became the third place that brought Putin and Pugachev together. In the 1990s, churches were in dire need of funds for restoration, and the monastery was no exception. Pugachev, by his own account, gave money to the monks. He more than recouped everything he had spent: when Putin became president, Pugachev's business flourished.

Finally, the last Orthodox lobbyist in Putin's circle who must be mentioned is businessman Konstantin Malofeev. According to his own account, he converted to faith in his youth, after a serious illness.

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True, his colleague recalls that in the early 2000s, he knew Malofeev, no longer a youth, as a beardless investment banker interested not in the eternal but in money and entertainment. "And then one day he suddenly became a monarchist with a beard," our interlocutor smiles.70 But even having become a monarchist, Malofeev did not lose his interest in money. When, 20 years ago, he needed to attract French investors to his company, Nutritek, which produced baby food, he appealed to faith and the issue of the survival of Russian children—they allegedly had nothing to eat. At the same meeting with the French, Malofeev asked for an icon so he could cross himself (very similar to Goloshchapov's trick).71 The money received from the French was ultimately used not to save children from starvation, but to buy up shares, which formed the basis of Malofeev's billion-dollar fortune. The peak of his career came in 2014. That's when fighting began in Ukraine, after a group of armed men under the command of Igor Girkin crossed the Russian-Ukrainian border and captured Slavyansk (Girkin had previously

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(And his people participated in the seizure of Crimea). Girkin, a former FSB officer, headed the security service at Malofeev's company in 2014. Girkin's emails would later be hacked, revealing that he had been constantly reporting to his superiors about his activities in Ukraine. It was also proven that Malofeev continues to spend considerable money, earned through his closeness to the Kremlin, to support the ongoing war in Ukraine. When we asked one of Russia's leading bankers, who knew Malofeev personally, about Malofeev, he smiled and said, "The only question is: is Malofeev a full-time employee of the secret services or just a recruited agent?" When asked why he thought so, the interviewee laughed: "Kostya asks a lot of questions, but he himself doesn't say anything."72

Readers may be under the false impression that the changes in religious life under Putin affected only the Orthodox Church. Of course, the dominant religion in the country claimed increased attention from the Kremlin, but similar processes were also taking place in Islam and Judaism. When, at the turn of

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In the 20th and 21st centuries, the Russian leadership sought ways to pacify the rebellious Muslim region of Chechnya, and they placed their trust in the local mufti, Akhmat Kadyrov. This man declared jihad against Russia in the mid-1990s and even fought against federal troops, but with Putin's rise to power, he defected to Russia. Since then, the Kadyrov clan has exercised absolute control over the Muslim republic and receives colossal subsidies from the state budget, with a significant portion of this money going toward luxurious living.

the life of the Chechen leadership. But the

most telling story happened with Russian Jews—Putin was forced to deal with them as soon as he came to power. In 2000, the Russian Jewish Congress (REC) was controlled by people the president considered personal enemies. The organization was headed by oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky, who owned major media outlets, primarily the NTV television channel, which harshly criticized Putin during the election campaign. Russia's Chief Rabbi, Adolf Shaevich, was considered Gusinsky's protégé, and the Kremlin was not happy with this. Putin would later say that he

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“many Jewish friends”73; this is true, so attracting Russian Jews to his side was perhaps important to him not only for political but also for personal reasons.

In 2000, then-head of the Kremlin administration, Alexander Voloshin, summoned his deputy, Vladislav Surkov, and, with the words, "I have Jewish blood, and so do you," offered to find an alternative to Shaevich. Surkov quickly reported to his superior: there was a little-known Federation of Jewish Communities (FJC) in Russia. From the Kremlin's perspective, it had a major advantage: it was dominated by representatives of the Chabad religious movement, historically loyal to the authorities. Thus, this organization was chosen by the Kremlin to become the country's main Jewish structure. The leader of the Chabad movement, Berel Lazar, readily engaged with the authorities. The problem was one: FJC was not legally registered in Russia, and without formal status, the Kremlin could not interact with it. FJC registration, a tedious bureaucratic procedure, was so important that it was handled by the country's highest leadership. Voloshin summoned Chaika,

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then the Minister of Justice, the future Prosecutor General, and one of the 12 "Athonites." "Yuri Yakovlevich, I know you don't like Jews," the head of the presidential administration began, and immediately got down to business: "We need to quickly register the FEOR." But then a new problem emerged—

Berel Lazar turned out to be an American without a Russian passport. The entire plan to create a loyal Jewish organization could have been thwarted: the procedure for obtaining Russian citizenship is even more complicated than registering the entire structure, and without a passport, Lazar had no right to manage anything. Putin personally resolved the problem: on May 29, 2000, he signed a decree granting the rabbi citizenship, and at the end of June, the FEOR was registered.74 From then on, Berel Lazar could rightfully be called the chief rabbi of Russia. In this capacity, he began to be regularly invited to the Kremlin, and his organization consistently demonstrated its loyalty.

ity to the authorities.

Berl Lazar is one of the heroes of this chapter who managed to maintain closeness to Putin throughout his long reign. Neither the Kremlin's open support for anti-Semitic

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Neither the involvement of organizations in the Middle East nor the attack on Ukraine have hindered this closeness—Russia's Chief Rabbi regularly and obsequiously communicates with Putin. The problem of background anti-Semitism at the highest levels, mentioned by the head of the Kremlin administration in the above-mentioned episode, has also not gone away. For example, one of Putin's aides, Viktor Ivanov, a former colleague of the president in the KGB and the St. Petersburg mayor's office, was known in the Kremlin for removing all people with Jewish (and Armenian) surnames from the list of those awarded state orders. And this is no small matter: an award from the president is a significant milestone for any official. Mikhail Rubin, one of the authors of this book, once read an interesting review about himself: in the correspondence of a Kremlin official, which was made public, he was called a "kike." The fates of other religious lobbyists in Putin's court have not been as rosy as those of Berl Lazar. Relations between the president and Pugachev began to cool after 2009. Soon, several

criminal cases were brought against the banker. He now lives in France and gives interviews in which he talks about...

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He tells us what unprecedented influence he once had on Putin (these stories, as those close to the president say, are largely fictitious). Poltavchenko was good at being servile and perhaps fervently believed in God, but he turned out to be a lousy manager. Our interlocutors in St. Petersburg's leadership constantly reported that economic affairs

The mayor was little interested in prayers, unlike prayers—often during working hours. In 2018, he was fired.
But, naturally, not for professional incompetence or corruption, but as a result of a conflict with Putin's most influential friend, Yuri Kovalchuk. As compensation, Poltavchenko was given a lucrative position as head of the board of directors of the state shipbuilding corporation. And the new governor was Kovalchuk's man, Alexander Beglov. It seems fitting that he, too, is an Athos native and also a lousy governor.

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4. Privatization 2.0

How Putin's Friends Reached the Peak of Power, But Lost Their Trust

Orthodox cronies, “Jewish friends,” trusted colleagues from the KGB and FSB—by the end of Putin’s first presidential term, that is, around 2004, all these people formed the circle of those who governed and owned Russia.

Before discussing this circle, however, it's necessary to explain whom Putin once cryptically referred to as his "Jewish friends." Apparently, he had very specific people in mind, most of whom we've already described as "bandits"—the only group in his circle we haven't yet discussed.

It so happened that in Leningrad sports -
More precisely, in wrestling, which Putin had been involved in since childhood, there were many Jews. Aron Bogolyubov, Anatoly Rakhlin, and Alexander Massarsky—these are the names of renowned Soviet judo and sambo coaches. They all came from Jewish families, and all, in one capacity or another, trained the young Putin and his partners on the tatami. But not

only them.

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There was another coach who had such a profound influence on the young Putin that he was mentioned twice in the first biography of the Russian president, the very same book "First Person" from 2000. However, strangely, this coach's last name is not mentioned, only his first and middle names, along with a mysterious description: "Leonid Ionovich. A cunning man." We later understood the reason for this oddity: the coach's last name, also Jewish, was Usvyatsov. He died in 1994, a member of a criminal group, and in the 1970s, when Putin studied wrestling with Usvyatsov, he was at the peak of his criminal career—between his first prison sentence for rape and his second, presumably for fraud. Putin likely didn't want to name his criminal idol in his first biography.

Usvyatsov's figure is key to understanding many of the facts presented in our book. He likely helped shape Putin's key traits—adventurism and faith in force. We met with Putin's peers who also trained under Usvyatsov in the 1970s, and they all have different, but consistent, stories about this man.

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Typical stories. In one case, he beat up a random fellow passenger on the tram; in another, he forcibly took money from someone. Putin himself, in the same book, "First Person," recalls an episode in which a "cunning man" beat up a coach from a rival sports club. It's clear that the sensei's behavior made a strong impression on the teenagers.

But it wasn't just about impressions. Usvyatsov also played a key role in Putin's career, as well as that of his partners on the tatami. As the story goes, it was the criminal trainer who, thanks to his connections, helped the young Putin get into the law department of Leningrad University (at that time, there was such a thing as a "sports quota," that is, the right to easier admission).

for promising athletes, which the young judoka took advantage of)77. This is very plausible: Putin graduated from school with a chemistry degree.
with a political bias, but he was still able to enroll in the law faculty, where in those years the competition reached 40 applicants per place.78 In other words, Usvyatsov laid the foundation for Putin's career.

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He also brought Putin into... show business. There's a little-known chapter in the Russian president's life, first discovered by one of the authors of this book: in the 1970s, a young Putin starred in films. However, the story isn't exactly Hollywood. In Leningrad in the 1970s, the aforementioned coach, Alexander Massarsky, was in charge of film stuntmen; under him, dozens of wrestlers worked as stuntmen—they knew how to "fight" beautifully and "die" realistically on camera. Usvyatsov was one of the stuntmen, as was the famous Leningrad sambo wrestler Sergei Suslin, a Munich Olympic participant. Both Usvyatsov and Suslin were also professional robbers. Together with their fellow stuntmen, they robbed people even during filming in other cities of the USSR. Incidentally, they robbed Jews again—those who were planning to emigrate to Israel and kept money and jewelry at home. Many of the stuntmen-gangsters would later go to prison and die in showdowns. That same Olympian, Suslin, would be arrested for the murder of his wife, whose body he buried in the garden, wrapped in a Soviet national team kimono. With such evidence, finding the stuntman wasn't difficult, and witnesses...

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They knew him from his screen tests. After leaving the zone, Suslin went to Moscow, where he suddenly died of a heart attack right next to Lenin's Mausoleum on Red Square. This story could have been the perfect epigraph to that historical period: the USSR was collapsing along with its values and

The institutions that he cherished made the young and strong become bandits and then die, not in pretense, but for real.

Now you understand the company young Putin found himself in, brought to the set by Usvyatsov. The future president played nameless Soviet and German soldiers dying in the Russian snow in the war films "Blockade" and "Izhora Battalion." His best friend of the time, Arkady Rotenberg, another Leningrad wrestler from a Jewish family, fell into the snow with him. Arkady, like his younger brother Boris, also a wrestler, came from the "labor aristocracy"—their father was a manager at a Soviet factory. The Rotenbergs were richer than the Putins, but apparently this didn't stop the teenagers from becoming close friends. Later,

By talking about "Jewish friends," the president is almost certainly

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Nyaka thought about the large Rotenberg family - Arkady and Boris will have many children, and many of them will occupy important positions under Putin.
coin.

When Vladimir Putin chose a career in the KGB in the 1970s, Arkady Rotenberg remained in sports. Usvyatsov helped him become a trainer at one of Leningrad's small gyms, where Boris Rotenberg also worked. One of their fellow athletes suggests that in the 1980s, the Rotenbergs were involved in petty criminal activity, providing protection for businessmen and "getting involved in showdowns."

many athletes made a living this way back then.79 Be that as it may, the Rotenbergs did not achieve fame or fortune in the 1980s, and in the 1990s, Arkady and his family emigrated to Germany.80 This was what many residents of the USSR with German or Jewish roots did at that time. Putin and Rotenberg's coaches, Massarsky and Bogolyubov, also left for Germany. The latter admitted that he was able to quickly obtain documents thanks to Putin's connections in state security.81 It is possible that Putin also helped Rotenberg leave his homeland, and years later he would

children boast of their patriotism.

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Rotenberg didn't become a burgher—he returned to Russia just as his wrestling friend began to make a meteoric rise in Moscow. Here's how Rotenberg himself recalls the turning point in his life: "In the fall of 1998, Vladimir Putin called me and suggested meeting and discussing the prospects of organizing a professional judo club. By this time, Vladimir Vladimirovich was already working in Moscow, and he likely had new opportunities to promote the idea."82 Thus, the Yavara-Neva wrestling club was founded in St. Petersburg, occupying buildings on Kamenny Island—the former nursing home of Emperor Paul I, converted for sports purposes, with an extension that had been used as a public toilet during the Soviet era.

Later, already fabulously enriched, Rotenberg will claim that he started the business back in the 90s.
x. That's not true. He and his brother would have remained unsuccessful athletes if their partner on the tatami hadn't become the president of Russia in 2000. "When he moved to Moscow, the first thing he did was rent an office on Tverskaya Street in the city center. He just sat there, and people came to him."

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"And they offered various projects, since everyone had heard that he was a friend *of the former,* " a friend of Arkady Rotenberg recalls the beginning of his business career. "It was clear that he was a man with criminal tendencies. He was constantly looking around."83 The Rotenbergs' first serious business—SMP Bank—was launched in 2001. Its shareholders, besides Arkady, included that same Konstantin Goloshchapov, another "bandit" from Putin's entourage, mentioned above. As a former business partner of Rotenberg's recalls, 20% of the bank's shares were given to the "Chekist" Poltavchenko.84 At the beginning of Putin's reign, Goloshchapov and Poltavchenko convinced Arkady Rotenberg to convert to Orthodoxy. However, of the three, according to their then-friend, only Poltavchenko truly believed in God. However, his faith didn't prevent him from flagrantly violating secular laws: Poltavchenko, a lifelong civil servant, was not allowed to engage in business. Therefore, his share in SMP Bank was registered to his sister-in-law, Irina Vasilyeva.

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In 2013, Vladimir Putin awarded Arkady Rotenberg the Order of Friendship. In 2020, he awarded his friend the title of Hero of Labor. And in 2022, he presented him with the Order "For Services to the Fatherland."
III degree.

Dmitry Azarov/ Kommersant

By the end of Putin's second term, Rotenberg's company, Stroygazmontazh, would seemingly spring up out of thin air, becoming the largest recipient of government infrastructure contracts for several years. At the same time, his younger brother, Boris, would join his elder brother's business. "Arkady"

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"He simply invited him and gave him half of the SMP Bank shares," says our source, who knows the family well. "Until 2006, Boris lived mostly in Finland, where he coached teenagers in judo. Boris is not a businessman at all; he's an oligophrenic with the habits of a gangster. He can't utter a single coherent sentence."85

The Rotenberg family is quite possibly a unique case in the history of business, as they have had a hand in literally every area where state money can be obtained: from bridge construction to urban greening and the publishing of school textbooks. At their peak, Arkady Rotenberg's fortune was estimated by Forbes magazine at $4 billion, while Boris's was worth $1.7 billion. Whenever Rotenberg Sr. was asked whether his acquaintance with Putin contributed to his success, the former stuntman replied that he had never resorted to the president's patronage in business matters. This, of course, is again untrue. Many businessmen who encountered the Rotenberg family recalled how they flaunted their friendship with Putin and forcefully took their favorite...

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assets belonging to them. In a quiet corner of central Moscow lies the Gusyatnikoff restaurant. Arkady Rotenberg took the building from its previous owner when he moved to Moscow in the 2000s. In classic Italian mafia films, crime bosses typically set up their headquarters in an inconspicuous pizzeria. Gusyatnikoff, which specializes in Russian cuisine, became such a headquarters for the Rotenberg family—it is there that members of this vast clan discuss their unsavory dealings. Speaking of mafia, when Leonid Usvyatsov, the mentor of the Rotenbergs and Putin, died in 1994, his favorite student, Arkady, was in charge of his funeral. It was Rotenberg, according to the

wishes of his late...

A monument with a very telling epitaph was erected on the grave of a famous teacher: “I am dead, but the mafia is immortal.” Years later, the British

journalist Luke Harding would call the system of power that developed under Putin a mafia state.86 This is a very accurate term in the sense that, like the mafia, the current Russian leadership operates under an unspoken system: subordinates promise their loyalty and

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carrying out sensitive tasks, and he guarantees their safety and enrichment. The main method of profiteering is simple: obtain state assets or budget contracts for next to nothing. What happened during the first 10 years of Putin's presidency can be called "privatization 2.0." The new courtiers, who missed the chance to participate in the privatization of state property in the 1990s (when the first Russian billionaires emerged, from Roman Abramovich to Mikhail Khodorkovsky), were greedy for valuable gifts from the tsar. Stroygazmontazh, the foundation of Arkady Rotenberg's multi-billion dollar empire, arose from the former assets of the state-owned company Gazprom. Rotenberg acquired the enterprises at a price well below market value—for example, the deal did not take into account the fact that Stroygazmontazh

They also won multi-billion-dollar government contracts for the construction of the Nord Stream gas pipeline. That is, first, state-owned Gazprom handed over its assets to a private individual, and then began paying that individual huge sums of money for the construction of its pipeline. This scheme was used everywhere. Another wrestler who was involved in sports

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Along with Putin, Vasily Shestakov not only became a State Duma deputy, but also went into business supplying food to Rosreserve, the agency Putin heads.

After coming to power, he imprisoned another of his friends, the "Chekist" and "priest" Alexander Grigoriev. The Orthodox "bandit" and fighter Konstantin Goloshchapov received state contracts for the restoration of church monuments. The "Athonet" and "Chekist" Yakunin created a shadowy network of companies that received state contracts from Russian Railways, whose management Putin entrusted to him. The "St. Petersburg" Kovalchuk brothers also became fabulously rich thanks to Gazprom: they received assets that the state company had disposed of as allegedly "non-core"— the insurance company Sogaz, a stake in Gazprombank, and others. "St. Petersburg" Gennady Timchenko, the same one who likely helped Putin save Anatoly Sobchak from arrest in the 1990s, received, among other things, stakes in companies involved in the transshipment and sale of Russian oil on the global market. Timchenko's case is particularly illustrative. In 2003, Putin brutally punished the obstinate

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Oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who founded one of Russia's largest oil companies, Yukos, in the 1990s. Khodorkovsky and his partners were imprisoned or forced out of the country, and Yukos was seized in favor of the state—by 2007, most of its assets had gone to the state-owned company Rosneft, to which the president would eventually send another "Chekist" to manage it, the same Igor Sechin who once exposed Putin's adultery. But someone had to sell the oil to the West—and this lucrative business fell to Timchenko. The trading company he founded, Gunvor, quickly became the leader in the sale of Russian crude oil on the global market (Gunvor's turnover in 2004 was about five billion dollars, and by 2012 it had reached 93 billion).88 That is, the president literally took away property from the heroes of the privatization of the 90s, which is sometimes contemptuously called “Yeltsin’s”, in favor of the heroes of the new privatization, “privatization 2.0”, which has every right to bear the name “Putin’s”.

If we continue the extremely apt comparison of Putin's regime with the mafia, we come to the following conclusion:

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to another analogy: every criminal clan, no matter how much its members boast of their loyalty-
each other, sooner or later collapses due to "rats," that is, betrayal and internal squabbles. Self-interest and attempts to hide one's own crimes destroy any loyalty, real and especially ostentatious. Over the course of the following chapters

we will clearly show you what it's really worth
loyalty in Putin's circle, but let's start this story now - with the same story of the fall of the Yukos company.

It's early 2004. Two Yukos shareholders and top managers, Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev, are already behind bars. Enormous tax claims have been filed against the company, and everyone understands that the oil giant's future is sealed. The remaining Yukos shareholders are then frantically trying to salvage at least something, including secret negotiations with Kremlin emissaries. Two people involved in this recounted the story to us: one of the "fixers"—the intermediary in the negotiations—

There was a shadowy businessman from St. Petersburg, Roman Tsepov. He boasted of his connections in the Kremlin on the

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at the highest level, and those to whom he came had every reason to believe him (negotiations with him, however, did not lead to anything)89.

In short, Roman Tsepov, born Beilenson (he later took his mother's maiden name), was also a "Jewish friend" of Vladimir Putin, simultaneously a "bandit," a "Petersburger," and, in a sense, a "Chekist." In his youth, Tsepov

Tsepov served in the police, then left government service and founded a private security firm, Baltic Escort, in St. Petersburg in the early 1990s. Tsepov's services were in demand; among other clients, he served the St. Petersburg mayor's office, and specifically Putin. The deputy mayor wasn't entitled to state protection, so Tsepov was assigned to Putin. The two were very close, as several people who worked in St. Petersburg at the time recall: Tsepov repeatedly carried out all sorts of sensitive tasks in the interests of the future Russian president. For example, it is believed that Tsepov served as an intermediary in communications between Putin and the St. Petersburg officials.

criminal leaders, and it was he who allegedly organized Putin's escape to Valaam

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monastery in the summer of 1996, when Sobchak lost the elections and his entire team was under threat of criminal prosecution90.

True, Tsepov had one peculiarity that many liked, but Putin hardly did. The fact is, the influential security guard with connections in the criminal underworld was a rather eccentric character: he both directed and starred in films, earning the nickname "Producer." He led a social life, socialized with celebrities, told true and improbable stories about himself, and even made up jokes about himself. In short, he loved *to show off .*

literally (racing his Hummer, one of the first in St. Petersburg, down Nevsky Prospect) and figuratively (telling those around him that he could help him get appointed governor and minister). This made Tsepov a near-legendary figure in St. Petersburg, but most likely infuriated Putin, who had learned to value inconspicuousness during his time in the KGB. In 2003, Tsepov gave an interview to a small St. Petersburg media outlet, where he spoke for the first time about his friendship with Putin, who was already all-powerful at the time.

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President of Russia.91 It turned out that one of the leaders of the St. Petersburg criminal underworld was connected to the country's president. Tsepov's acquaintances in Moscow were unlikely to appreciate such frankness. And then came the Yukos affair, which Tsepov intervened in at the behest of his eccentric nature. And then something sinister happened.

On the morning of September 11, 2004, Tsepov arrived at the FSB building in St. Petersburg—the same "Big House" in the city center where Putin and his many FSB friends, described in this book, once worked. The circumstances of this visit are not exactly known. Two of Tsepov's acquaintances say he often interacted with high-ranking FSB officials, and the meeting looked like a friendly get-together over tea and cookies. Among those receiving Tsepov was FSB General Andrei Ruchyev—he had worked in the Leningrad KGB since 1980, making him a colleague of Putin's. After drinking tea with the FSB officers, Tsepov made another short stop—at the local branch of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, where he reportedly ate ice cream. The next day, he began his torture.

It is important to die.

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One of our sources, who knew the circumstances of Tsepov's death, was generous with terrifying epithets: "He was falling apart from the inside, his skin peeled off, his hair fell out, he was constantly delirious."92 The best doctors in St. Petersburg tried to save Tsepov, but the only thing they could do was determine that he had been poisoned with some substance that caused the symptoms of radiation sickness. The death of Putin's all-powerful bodyguard was predetermined and occurred exactly two weeks after his tea party with the FSB officers.

The cream of St. Petersburg gathered for Tsepov's church farewell—gang leaders crossed themselves shoulder to shoulder with police chiefs and city officials. The head of the presidential security, General Viktor Zolotov, a colleague and friend of Tsepov, also attended the funeral.

And yet another "Chekist" next to Vladimir Putin. Saying goodbye to his comrade, Zolotov offered a toast in which he promised to find and punish his killers.
But this did not happen: the criminal case of Tsepov's murder was simply forgotten, as if it had never happened. Tsepov's elderly parents were never able to even look at the murder case materials.

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son's status - they were refused every time. Putin, the former
their son's friend.

Years later, journalists linked the circumstances of Tsepov's death with several similar cases in which people unpopular with the Kremlin died from poison. A year before Tsepov, in the summer of 2003, journalist Yuri Shchekochikhin died painfully with similar symptoms. At the time, he was a State Duma deputy representing democratic forces and investigating FSB abuses along with his parliamentary colleague, Yuli Rybakov, the same man whom the young KGB officer Putin imprisoned in the 1970s. Shchekochikhin's death, like Tsepov's murder, was never investigated. And in 2006, Alexander Litvinenko, a former FSB officer and ardent Putin critic who had fled Russia, died in the UK with similar symptoms. His murder was investigated by Scotland Yard, and it was discovered that Litvinenko had been poisoned by Russian intelligence agents using the radioactive isotope polonium-210. Years later, FSB agents would poison several more people (we

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(We'll return in the fourth part of the book). This will finally convince the entire world that the Russian authorities are using poison against their opponents. However, as long as Putin remains in power, all this is unlikely to lead to an investigation into the horrific murder of Roman Tsepov, a once-loyal friend of the president—a friend who at some point began to behave too provocatively. His killers were not only never found, but were probably never sought. Thus, Putin and his henchmen answered for the first time the question of what loyalty means in their circle.

Tsepov was buried next to the graves of Putin's parents in St. Petersburg, in the same place where the "priest" Alexander Grigoriev would later be buried. In death, Tsepov could no longer cast a shadow on the infallible leader of the nation. General Ruchyev continued to serve in senior positions in the FSB, and after retiring, he received a seat on the board of directors of one of St. Petersburg's ports—unlike Tsepov, he was treated "like a man." Ruchyev did not respond to questions from the authors of this book.

The Rotenberg brothers soon quarreled among themselves, as if to show that loyalty in this circle was impossible even between blood relatives.

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co-founders. After 2008, Arkady no longer gave shares in his enterprises to his younger brother, even though the latter regularly and rudely demanded them, recalls a businessman who knew both of them well.93 As a result, Boris became interested in car racing—he's noticeably better at it than speaking coherently. Arkady Rotenberg remained Putin's closest confidant, carrying out his most delicate assignments. And what about judo, the presidential sport that paved the way for Putin and his friends to power and money? If you recall, the Yavara-Neva wrestling club, founded by Putin and Rotenberg in 1998, received a former public restroom in a prestigious area of St. Petersburg. The choice of location was symbolic—in the early 1990s, the same building (naturally, after the restroom was removed) housed the inconspicuous company Sovex. This firm was involved in oil operations and had ties to Putin and the criminal elements of the time. It seemed as if Vladimir Putin and Arkady Rotenberg were drawn to the places of their wild and not-so-law-abiding youth. The Yavara-Neva judokas occupy buildings on Kamensk-

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The island still exists. However, Arkady Rotenberg, whose success began in these premises, has long since built himself several luxurious palaces.

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5. A respectable Lord for respectable gentlemen

How the Russian Orthodox Church Found Money and Power, But Seemed to Lose Faith

The Cathedral of Christ the Savior in the very center of Moscow - A symbolic place. In the mid-19th century, it was erected to commemorate the Russian Empire's victory over Napoleon. The greatest victory of Russian arms required the largest church in the country. In 1931, at the height of the Bolshevik anti-clerical campaign, the church was blown up.

This event became a symbol of a new era. Another symbol was planned to be erected on the site of the cathedral—the tallest building in the USSR, a complex for meetings of Soviet government bodies with a multi-meter sculpture of Vladimir Lenin at the top. But the project remained unrealized due to a lack of manpower and resources, although a small reminder of this ambitious plan remains in Moscow. Right there, opposite the blown-up Cathedral of Christ the Savior, a rare architectural monument and also a symbol of sorts was erected. A gas station in the Soviet Art Deco style is intended

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It was intended for visitors to the unbuilt skyscraper, but ultimately became a government facility—to this day, it can't be used by ordinary Muscovites, only by the president's security detail. A year-round outdoor swimming pool was eventually built on the site of the blown-up power cathedral—one of the most surreal places in the capital. Even

In severe frosts, ordinary Soviet citizens swam here, almost invisible behind the steam clubs. After the fall of the USSR, the capital of a great country demanded new symbols—in the 1990s, Moscow authorities decided to restore Russia's largest cathedral. And so they restored it, or rather, rebuilt it. The cathedral, although reminiscent of its original model, was criticized by historians and architects. The construction contracts were awarded to a company with government ties, which used inauthentic materials, liberally relied on gilding, and other trappings of luxury. As a result, the cathedral once again became a symbol—this time of corruption and garish luxury.

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On February 21, 2012, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was once again transformed in its history

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Into a symbol. That morning, 29-year-old Ekaterina Samutsevich took out a guitar while standing on the solea in front of the altar and struck a few loud chords. Cathedral security guards immediately pounced on Samutsevich. While they struggled with her, her four companions made their way to the altar of Russia's main Orthodox church and shed their outer clothing, revealing multicolored dresses and brightly colored tights underneath. All four wore colorful balaclavas. The girls managed to scream a few verses of the song Samutsevich had begun before security guards forcibly escorted them all to the exit. The entire incident lasted 40 seconds, but the story was just beginning.

That same evening, a video titled “Punk Prayer ‘Mother of God, Drive Putin Away!’” appeared on YouTube, consisting of a performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and previously recorded
scenes with the same musicians in another Moscow cathedral. The performers were listed as the punk group Pussy Riot, which consisted mainly of members of the famous art collective "Voina." The latter was famous for its political performances. A year and a half before the events in the cathedral

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With the Christ the Savior project, the Voina artists accomplished what the Leningrad nonconformist artists Rybakov and Volkov had failed to do 30 years earlier. As you may recall, Soviet dissidents scrawled seditious graffiti on the wall of the Peter and Paul Fortress, for which young Lieutenant Putin and his KGB colleagues jailed the artists. In the summer of 2010, Voina dealt a far more significant blow to the Russian secret services. On the night of June 14, the artists painted a gigantic white phallus on the pavement of Liteiny Bridge in St. Petersburg, right next to the "Big House," the FSB/ KGB headquarters where Putin once worked. Minutes later, the bridge was raised, and a 65-meter-long erect penis appeared right in front of the windows of the all-powerful Russian secret service. The insult was no small one: Voina became the target of brutal persecution by the Russian authorities for years to come. This is one reason why the Kremlin's reaction to the events at the Christ the Savior Cathedral was so harsh. On February 26, the Orthodox holiday of Forgiveness Sunday—the day that symbolizes the remission of earthly sins—a massacre was launched against the punk band members.

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A criminal case for hooliganism was opened during the prayer service. A few days later, three of them—Ekaterina Samutsevich, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, and Maria Alyokhina—were detained in Moscow. The investigation and trial lasted six months and ended with a guilty verdict. Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina received two years in prison, while Samutsevich received the same suspended sentence. It was an unprecedentedly harsh sentence for such a charge. A wave of protests in support of Pussy Riot swept across the world, and politicians, human rights activists, and Hollywood stars expressed solidarity with the girls.

Among the few who didn't call for leniency toward the musicians were the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, who seemed to have forgotten Christian values. Sources cited by journalists claimed that the initiative to harshly and publicly punish the "Voina" participants came from the Kremlin, or more precisely, from Vladimir Putin personally.

“We had no anti-religious motive,”
Maria Alyokhina recalls the protest at the Christ the Savior Cathedral. "We simply perceived the Russian Orthodox Church as a department of the Kremlin. Or a department of the FSB."95 These words describe the situation perfectly.

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that had developed in Russian religious life by 2012, after Putin had served two presidential terms and one term as prime minister. "The choice of Kirill as head of the

church in 2009 was the Kremlin's doing, although everyone, even within the church, understood that he was the worst candidate," says Orthodox banker Ilya Yurov, who was close to the late Patriarch Alexy II and was then spending considerable money to support the Russian Orthodox Church.96 Yurov and a former official97, who requested anonymity, recall that Igor Sechin (at the time, Putin's closest subordinate in the government) oversaw the election of a new patriarch on behalf of the government in 2009. This was, in a sense, emblematic: in the 1980s, Sechin wore epaulets, in the 1990s he helped Putin with a secret hideout for intimate encounters with a woman, and now he was in charge of church life.

Several of our interlocutors at once - how

secular officials and church-going laypeople alike almost verbatim repeated one phrase describing Patriarch Kirill (Gundyaev), already known to readers of this book as “agent Mikhailov”: “He is too materialistic”98. Makhin-

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The trade in cigarettes, alcohol, and other worldly goods became a thing of the past. In 2009, when Vladimir Gundyaev, with the Kremlin's help, was enthroned as the primate of Russian Orthodoxy under the name of Patriarch Kirill, the church had already become an extremely profitable enterprise, enjoying the exclusive favor of the secular authorities. The Russian Orthodox Church had two banks (Sofrino and Peresvet), its own industrial production (the Sofrino enterprise), its own hotels, and agricultural land throughout the country. But most importantly, the Orthodox Church lays claim to the title of Russia's largest non-state landowner (characteristically, the church is followed by Russian Railways, which, as you may recall, was controlled by Putin's protégé, the Orthodox "Chekist" Vladimir Yakunin).

Was there anything the church refused to profit from? Probably not. In the 2000s, one Russian art historian received a sudden offer from a private individual to go to the Moscow region.

kovye, look at the collection of church and secular relics of past centuries100. Far-

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Our interlocutor was shocked by the neck: he met with an FSB lieutenant colonel, who drove him from Moscow along the Rizhskoye Highway to a huge and carefully guarded warehouse. There, incredible things were on display—for example, a gilded carriage made during the reign of Peter the Great, which was used by Russian tsars, worth about 18 million.

dollars, or inlaid hussar pistols. When asked for clarification, our interlocutor was told that this was all the property of the Russian Orthodox Church, apparently received as part of the restitution under Boris Yeltsin, which it is now selling with the assistance of the secret services.

At one point, Kirill even imagined that he was almost equal in status to the country's president, a person who knows the patriarch recalls with a smile.101 For example, he once invited Putin to become, with him, co-chairman of the public organization "World Russian People's Council" - the essence of this structure is unlikely to be explained even by its members, but the state supports it in every possible way. The Kremlin immediately hinted to Kirill that he "must have gone crazy, thinking that he

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"equals with Putin," the same source says. As a result, Kirill sat at the head of the council with the war criminal Konstantin Malofeev, about whom we have already spoken. If not political power, then personal enrichment is probably

what Kirill decided on and focused on Mammon. A year after his enthronement, he secretly brought his own second cousin Elena Kholodova into the shareholder and management of Peresvet Bank (the media, however, hinted that this woman was Kirill's "common-law wife,"102), who had supposedly taken a vow of celibacy. This was indicated, among other things, by the fact that Kholodova lived in a luxurious apartment in the center of Moscow, owned by Patriarch Kirill. The Church never commented on these facts in essence). Then the bank collapsed.

No—it will turn out that the managers appointed by the patriarch were engaged in banal fraud. Financial irregularities will also be uncovered at the Sofrino enterprise, the largest manufacturer of church goods in Russia.

Kirill is an exemplary money-grubber. For him in different parts of the country they built or restored

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Four large residences were established. The official one—in the very center of Moscow, where Stalin had settled the Russian patriarchs in 1943, after evicting the Third Reich embassy—was the most modest. Near St. Petersburg and in Gelendzhik, on the Black Sea coast, actual palaces with vineyards, guard houses, and other trappings of the good life were erected for Kirill's needs. To disguise these palaces, the church called them "spiritual" or "pilgrimage" centers, but the media convincingly proved that the only pilgrim who rested there from his labors and vigils was Patriarch Kirill. The Kremlin provided the head of the Russian Orthodox Church—the only church leader—with federal security and a government plane. On this plane and with this security, Kirill flew not only (and not so much) to secluded parishes scattered across Russia, but also on foreign business trips, among which, for example, was a trip across the globe to Antarctica. There, Kirill was able to take a photo with Gentoo penguins.

us.

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Igor Palkin/ Patriarchate website/ AFP

Kirill's penchant for posing has often let him down. In 2012, when the Pussy Riot members were on trial in Moscow, random users discovered a surprising photo on the patriarchate's website: Kirill is sitting in his office, wearing, as expected, a black cassock and white hood, but the reflection in the surface of the desk behind which the high priest sits does not correspond to reality. It turned out that the patriarch's subordinates had crudely edited Kirill's image —simply

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They erased a gold Breguet watch worth approximately $30,000 from his left wrist. But here's the problem: they forgot to erase the watch's reflection in the polished tabletop. At first, the patriarchate offered a ridiculous excuse, claiming the patriarch didn't have any expensive jewelry, but later admitted to retouching the photo and declined to comment further. However, the most telling photo embarrassment happened in Kirill's life in 2023. During a photo shoot at the Danilov Monastery—the patriarch also has a residence there—a huge painting in a gilded frame was captured on camera. The canvas depicts Kirill in the company of no less than the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—one might say, on equal terms with the heavenly guardians of humanity.

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A painting in Patriarch Kirill's office

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The story was given a piquant twist by the fact that Kirill's enhanced Trinity copied the most famous icon of Orthodoxy, Andrei Rublev's "Trinity," considered priceless by art historians. Rublev's icon, which had been kept for decades in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, was donated to the church by Vladimir Putin just a few months before the photo shoot at the Danilov Monastery. This sparked public outrage, as the icon's presence in a church, where candles burn and temperature control is difficult to maintain, could compromise the medieval monument's preservation. But Putin was adamant.

Since May 2023, the Rublev icon has been housed in the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius near Moscow.

The phrase "a respectable Lord for respectable gentlemen," which became the title of this chapter, is a quote from the best-selling novel "Generation 'P'," written in the 90s by Viktor Pelevin. The copywriter hero comes up with this phrase as an advertising slogan to lure wealthy parishioners to the Orthodox Church, which was then poor and unattractive. By 2012, when the Kremlin and the Patriarchate jailed the musicians Pussy Riot, all re-

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It's changed dramatically. The Church has become *respectable,* its leaders and patrons are all *respectable* gentlemen handling *substantial* amounts of money.

Of course, the Church accepted favors from the Kremlin not only in kind (icons, land, and so on). The persecution of Pussy Riot opened a new chapter in the cooperation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin: the authorities, in order to please the Patriarchate, introduced criminal penalties for "insulting the feelings of believers." Russians began to be tried for inappropriate photos near the church or unflattering comments about God on social media (the article was also applied to those who "insulted" representatives of non-Christian faiths). Radical Christian fundamentalist groups proliferated around the Russian Orthodox Church, forcibly tearing down "non-God-like"

"desirable" exhibitions and film screenings, engaged in bullying on social media and in real life. The most

A well-known radical of this persuasion was the leader of the group "God's Will" Dmitry Tsorionov (En-teo) - he began his activist career with an attack on a teenager wearing a T-shirt with Pussy Riot symbols.

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The Orthodox Church has traditionally disliked the proselytizing activity of modern Western Christian movements in Russia, and here too the authorities have acceded to Kirill's wishes. Jehovah's Witnesses were declared an extremist organization in the spring of 2017: reading Jehovah's Witnesses' books or holding secret religious services can result in long prison terms for believers. By 2025, at least 850 Jehovah's Witnesses, including foreigners, had been charged in criminal cases. Mormons and Pentecostals were also subject to selective repression.

Despite all this, in Russia today it continues
Thousands of Orthodox priests, monks, church teachers, and administrators who sincerely believe in God and do much for society are likely forced to serve. Some of them inevitably come into conflict with the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church and suffer for their beliefs. When the Kremlin unleashed a war against Ukraine in February 2022, nearly 300 Orthodox priests signed an open letter calling for an end to the bloodshed. Several signatories were defrocked in the following months,

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or subjected to other types of church punishment. There were priests who were punished by secular authorities as well—at least one clergyman is in prison for “spreading fake news about the army.”104 (This article is a central component of the military censorship introduced in Russia. According to it, anyone who criticizes the actions of the Russian army in Ukraine can receive a prison sentence. At least 130 Russian citizens have been punished under this article.) At the same time, the church can go for years without reacting to the actions of its representatives that actually violate the norms of law and morality. Father

Sergiy (Nikolai Romanov in the world) served as a priest for years near Yekaterinburg. He was ordained to the priesthood back in 2001, at a time when the church, just recovering from years of repression, needed new personnel. The hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church, neither then nor later, were bothered by the fact that Romanov had committed several serious crimes in his secular life, including murder and robbery (according to the regulations of the Russian Orthodox Church, a murderer cannot become a priest at all), and that he had been expelled from the theological school.

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dismissed for academic failure. In the early 2000s, Romanov became the head of one of the Yekaterinburg monasteries, where he developed a vigorous preaching activity.

ity - politicians appeared in his flock,

sports and show business stars. What did he preach about? About a global Jewish conspiracy, the dominance of "sodomites" in government bodies, "chipping" people with vaccines—in short, he repeated the main right-wing conservative conspiracy theories. Once, during an exorcism session (and Sergiy performed this as well), the priest addressed the demon being expelled from a man: "iPhone, get out!"105 All these oddities did not concern the church authorities until 2018, when the monk, completely out of touch with reality, began keeping a video diary on YouTube. In it, Sergiy compared himself to the last Russian Tsar, Nicholas II, and also denounced Patriarch Kirill and the president.

Putin. And in today's Orthodox Church, such a thing is already considered sedition. Only then did the church admit they had ordained an unworthy man and stripped Sergius of his cathedra. The secular authorities quickly joined in the persecution: Sergius was soon arrested and imprisoned.

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Why did Putin welcome the church? Could it be that he came to believe in God—if not at the start of his political career, then at least over the course of his many years in power and close contact with Orthodox Christians in his circle? In fact, the Russian president has never directly

answered the question of whether he believes in God (this, incidentally, applies to many other questions). Every time he speaks about faith, Putin talks about some...

then episodes of his mystical experience, from which it is impossible to draw any firm conclusion about
The sincerity of his religious feelings. In 2000, when

Putin was first invited to CNN's Larry King Live, in response to a question about his faith, the aspiring president told the story of a fire in his banya in 1996. Literally everything burned, Putin said, but the aluminum pectoral cross he had removed, a gift from his mother and blessed in Jerusalem, survived in the ashes (he removed the cross to avoid getting burned in the banya). "It was amazing," Putin said then, as if emphasizing the mystical nature of those events.

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Perhaps it is precisely because of Putin's evasive answers about his faith that his entourage still wonders whether the president communicates with a confessor. As mentioned above, after Putin visited the Pskov-Caves Monastery in August 2000 in the company of Archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov, a persistent rumor arose that this man was the head of state's confessor. Moreover, this cleric's conservative views correspond with Putin's rhetoric. Everything we know about Shevkunov suggests that he didn't just receive a position at the "Chekist" Sretensky Monastery next to the FSB building by chance. The cleric was close friends with the legendary General Nikolai Leonov, who was in charge of foreign intelligence and the KGB's analytical service, and apparently served as his confessor.

(This Chekist found God after the collapse of the Soviet Union.) Shevkunov, Leonov, and parliament member Alexander Krutov, an open anti-Semite, founded the publishing house "Russian House" back in the 1990s, which, long before Putin's Ukrainian adventure, published calls for the return of Crimea to Russia. Shevkunov took advantage of every opportunity to get close to power. The former high-ranking official

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The newcomer recalls the following circumstances of his acquaintance with the now Metropolitan108. In the early 2000s, Our interlocutor received a government-owned dacha in the Moscow region for use. One of his acquaintances immediately told him that the house needed to be consecrated to rid it of the spirits of the previous communist residents. Consecration of a home is an ancient ritual, still accepted in Orthodoxy: a priest comes to a new home and blesses it, receiving payment for it. This is usually done by ordinary priests, but Shevkunov, already an archimandrite at the time, came to the official. Over the years, Shevkunov no longer needed this side job. Now he is probably the most famous clergyman close to Putin. It was he who coined the phrase that anyone who loves Russia "can only pray for Vladimir Vladimirovich."109 Of course, as is customary in modern Russia, such a person did not end up without money—

According to journalists' estimates, the state spent no less than 20 billion rubles on his projects.110 In general, the public had every reason
to assume that this particular person is the president's spiritual mentor.

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But why would Putin, who has never even said he believes in God, need a spiritual father? The authors of this book became completely confused when they tried to verify the story about a spiritual father with key people in the president's entourage. First, we turned to his long-time aide, Vladislav Surkov. "No, I know for sure that it's a completely different person, not Shevkunov," Surkov said.111 Some time later, we verified this version during a conversation with Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov . "Well, who else, if not Shevkunov?" he asked, confused.112 This discord suggests that the Russian president probably doesn't have a spiritual father—that is, a person to whom Putin confides his deepest secrets during confession—113. "The most correct thing to say is that Shevkunov is not a spiritual father, but an ally,"

One of the cleric's acquaintances confirmed our assumption.114 Perhaps the answer

to the question of what exactly in the church interests Putin could have been found during that very visit to the Pskov-Pechersky Monastery in 2000. After a walk with Shevkunov, Putin went into the cell of the long-bearded man,

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A gray-haired monk wearing thick-framed glasses. A photograph of this cleric still hangs on the Kremlin website—it was the legendary elder John Krestyankin (who died in 2006).

kremlin.ru

Eldership is an important phenomenon in the Orthodox Church, based on a belief in mysticism. Fyodor Dostoevsky, in his novel The Brothers Karamazov, provides a comprehensive picture of it in a single episode. The novel's hero, the elder Zosima, was revered by believers as a seer during his lifetime—his advice was followed, his predictions were devoutly believed. And when

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Zosima died, and parishioners suddenly sensed a "rotten odor," that is, the smell of a decaying earthly body. Along with the body, their belief in the elder's mystical origins also decayed.

Shevkunov himself wrote extensively about Elder John Krestyankin. In one of his books, he reports that Father John repeatedly forbade parishioners from undergoing medical operations when he foresaw "dire consequences." "A funny old man," Putin said, quickly leaving Krestyankin's cell, recalled the Orthodox oligarch Sergei Pugachev, who accompanied the president on that trip. 115 In his opinion, there was no chemistry between Putin and Krestyankin. This was likely due to the fact that the elder was a dissident (he was sent to the Gulag under Stalin), whom, as we recall, Putin fought against during his time in the KGB.

Later, he finally found a comfortable elder without the dissident aura. We learned about this spiritual father by chance. One of our conversations with a clerk in the presidential administration unexpectedly turned to a medical topic: his wife was ill. The Kremlin employee had taken her to various doctors, but not only them…

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- Well, and, of course, we went to see Elder Elijah, - he said. When asked in surprise who it was, Putin's official's eyes widened: "How can you not know him?!

He's had everyone ."

It soon became clear that Elder Elijah (in the world, Alexei Nozdrin) had indeed been visited *by everyone,* meaning almost all the highest Russian officials, including Putin. This truly old man (he was born in 1932) lived in Moscow, in the so-called Patriarchal Compound, that is, right next door to Patriarch Kirill. This proximity was explained by the fact that Elijah was the Russian high priest's spiritual father, and had also known him since their seminary days, where they had studied together. At that time, "Alyosha," as the patriarch called the elder, was engaged in a "responsible" (also Kirill's word) job—he operated the telephone switchboard, connecting students calling from the seminary with other subscribers. As a rule, telephone operators reported to the KGB, because they knew all the callers' contacts. We cannot say for sure that Elijah was cooperating with the authorities, but it is also very likely

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that later the monk would be released from the USSR to live and work on Athos, that is, they would agree to give him a long business trip to a capitalist country.

Perhaps the past helped officials years later see Ilya as one of their own. "He's clairvoyant," one of Ilya's visitors explained to us, meaning that he seemed to see the future.118 In general, it's quite difficult to describe Ilya's views. It is known that he, like the rebellious Father Sergius, practiced exorcism. He generally spoke a lot about demons and the devil, and criticized the Soviet

power and praised the current one.

Putin met with Iliy several times.119 These meetings were never officially announced; what Putin asked the monk is also unknown. However, a photograph can be found online that hints at why Putin needs elders, and indeed the entire Orthodox clergy—aside from his penchant for the mystical. In this photo, Putin is talking with Iliy immediately after his re-election as president in 2018.

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Igor Palkin/ Patriarchate website

"I've seen the elder come to the presidential administration more than once," says our source in the Kremlin.120 And Elijah didn't do this to discuss the Almighty—on the contrary, he discussed purely mundane matters with those in power. Through this authority, the Kremlin conveyed requests to priests across Russia to support Putin in their sermons during the 2018 election campaign. It is reliably known

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and the fact that the elder himself directly campaigned for Putin: he called on his flock to vote for him so that the “godless” would not come to power, and he called the president’s opponents “curs”121. So did the entire church, headed by the patriarch—they supported the secular ruler of Russia in all his most

important and no less dubious undertakings.

The Church called on rebellious citizens to submit to the authorities in 2011–2012, when Putin’s power first wavered, helped the Kremlin rewrite the Constitution in an authoritarian vein in 2020, and justified the war against Ukraine in 2022. “Although Putin doesn’t truly believe in God, he needs the Church because it is the most understandable and least offensive social institution for the average Russian citizen—

"a simple woman of about forty from a small town. If you think about it, this woman is Putin's core voter," says one of our interlocutors,122 and sociological surveys confirm the validity of this interpretation. According to a 2022 FOM poll, 66% of Russians "trusted the Russian Orthodox Church."123 According to Levada Center polls, the largest percentage of Putin's supporters are

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Among women aged 40 and older, without higher education, living in small towns.124 "The current leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church has

betrayed Christ. Remember 'thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal'? Well, they've done everything the other way around," says former banker Ilya Yurov about Kirill and other prominent "Orthodox" figures in Putin's entourage.125 He once spent money on church maintenance and cared for the very same Valaam Monastery where Putin built his personal hermitage. But everything changed ten years ago. Yurov's banking business in Russia collapsed and was ultimately taken over by the state, and the businessman fled abroad. Courts in Russia and the UK have declared the banker a fraudster, although he insists that the business was destroyed by the authorities. In London, Yurov became a parishioner of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church; he continues to wear a beard as a symbol of his loyalty to tradition.

And the high clerics mentioned in this chapter never left—they continue to serve Vladimir Putin to this day, further consolidating their power and increasing their wealth. Ily Nozdrin lived to be 93. In 2025, he took to his grave the knowledge of

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Whether the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church worked for the KGB (assuming, of course, the Patriarch considers this a sin and confessed to it). Kirill himself will almost certainly remain Patriarch until his own death or Putin's. Tikhon Shevkunov, whoever he may have been, remains close to Putin and his entourage. He and Kirill regularly engage in behind-the-scenes struggles for closeness to the Russian Tsar. Wars among courtiers, even priests, are common practice in the closed society of which the Russian Orthodox Church has become a full-fledged part under Putin.

Pussy Riot singers Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova were released from prison and continued their musical and political careers. Years later, Alyokhina would fall in love with Dmitry Enteo, her former persecutor. Together, this unlikely couple would stage public protests against the FSB and the cult of personality. Because of their romantic relationship, Enteo was expelled from the organization he founded, "God's Will." Faith in Russia has always been a question of power and loyalty.

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6. Warriors and merchants

How Putin and his people
began to devour each other

Loyalty... The story of Roman Tsepov's meteoric rise and murderous fall has already answered the question of what yesterday's loyal friends are prepared to do if something or someone threatens them. But Tsepov's death was only the beginning.

Putin once said that he could forgive others everything except treason.126 In 2006, the entire world saw how terribly the Russian president could punish disloyalty—as he understood it. That fall, British media published a photograph of a balding man lying helplessly in a hospital bed in a London clinic. It was Alexander Litvinenko, a former KGB/FSB officer whom Putin had his own reasons for considering a traitor: Litvinenko had fled to the UK and from there criticized the Kremlin. As we have already written, Litvinenko, like Roman Tsepov, was killed by FSB agents—in an equally horrific manner; the difference is that few even in Russia knew about Tsepov's murder, and his death

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Litvinenko caused an international scandal. Under the influence of radioactive polonium mixed into his tea, Litvinenko agonizingly died for several weeks. Putin clearly felt no shame for what he had done. One of the poisoners, Andrei Lugovoi, was rewarded with a seat in the State Duma (we'll remember this man when we discuss his party, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia). In reality, however, Putin suspected treason not only in those who defected to the West but also in those who remained

at court. In turn, the tsar's inner circle, aware of his suspicions and cruelty, learned to skillfully exploit them.

Putin's courtiers, loyal to each other just yesterday, were mired in intrigue. They devoured each other for power, money, proximity to the leader, and sometimes even for women (more on that in the next part). In Russian political slang, these incessant intrigues are delicately referred to as the "war of the towers"—referring to the towers of the Moscow Kremlin. 2006–2008 was a very important time in Putin's career. We will often refer to this period in Russian history. What

word can be used to describe this?

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How can I describe this time for the president and his entourage? *Uncertainty.* Putin's first two legally permitted terms in office were expiring. Was he ready to change the Constitution to stay for a third term? Was he ready to leave? And if so, would he be able to return? And to whom would he entrust the country during his time?

Absence? And most importantly, what will happen to the untold riches and enticing prospects of Putin's courtiers if their overlord abandons the throne? These questions tormented the president's confidantes, and, at some point, probably even the president himself. It was precisely the uncertainty of that time that revealed the price of loyalty at the court of the Russian Tsar.

The president maintained the intrigue until the very end. Publicly, he said he wouldn't change the Constitution, but that didn't add any clarity about the country's future. Especially since Putin pretended to be choosing between two potential successors, who had been the talk of the media for some time. He knew both from his time in St. Petersburg, but each had his own experience. Dmitry Medvedev, considered a liberal, was Putin's subordinate in the St. Petersburg mayor's office, which is, in our class...

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The sifications were typical "St. Petersburgers." Sergei Ivanov, also from Leningrad, was a typical "Chekist," having served as Putin's deputy when he headed the FSB. To confuse observers, both successors were made "first deputy prime ministers of the government"—as ridiculous as that may sound. State media were also required to maintain neutrality—when covering the successors' work, they pointedly devoted roughly equal airtime to them.

Uncertainty is a fertile period for intrigue and showdowns. In the first half of 2006, the Chekists brought Putin an important

A report: they taped a private conversation between an unusual group of high-ranking officials. Among them were Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov, who was called a "technical" prime minister, meaning devoid of political ambitions and prospects; the powerful Prosecutor General Vladimir Ustinov, who orchestrated the aforementioned "Yukos affair"; the popular Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov; and the already familiar Igor Sechin, then deputy head of the presidential administration. What did they talk about?

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These two very different people? In their recordings, they allowed themselves to discuss the future after Putin and even before The idea was floated that the successor might not be Ivanov or Medvedev, but one of them.127 As one of our sources recounts, Prosecutor General Ustinov was the one who thought of himself more than anyone else—in private conversations, he hinted that he could handle the role of successor. Putin couldn't have liked this. He likely

remembered for the rest of his life how Ustinov's predecessor as chief prosecutor, Yuri Skuratov, nearly ended his own career, and that of President Boris Yeltsin as well. Moreover, the prosecutor's office had colossal powers at the time, simultaneously conducting both investigations and overseeing them. So Putin decided to act. Having received the report, the president immediately fired Ustinov (the shocked public was told it was all the Prosecutor General's "own desire") and, after a brief pause, transferred him to the insignificant post of Minister of Justice (and made Yuri Chaika, one of the 12 "Athonites" who occupied this post, Prosecutor General instead of Ustinov). At this point, Putin seemed to calm down, but not

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for a long time. A year later, just before the elections, he would disarm the prosecutor's office, just in case, by creating an Investigative Committee, appointing his classmate from Leningrad University, the super-loyal Alexander Bastrykin, nicknamed "Starosta," as its head. At the same time, Putin would also get rid of the second member of the "gang of four"—he would fire Fradkov as prime minister. It would seem that firing a "technical" prime minister—

A trivial matter. However, it should be taken into account that Putin and Fradkov know each other well outside of work, and the president even owed something to the then-prime minister. The fact is that Fradkov has known Putin's inner circle for ages. For example, back in the early 1980s, he worked alongside Yakunin on the Soviet Committee on Foreign Relations under the Council of Ministers—both were likely seconded there from the KGB. This connection persisted: it is said that in the 1990s, when Putin was still unknown to anyone, he even stayed overnight with Fradkov, who had made a career in the government, when visiting Moscow.128 So the president lashed out at his, if not his friend, then at least a good acquaintance, for disobedience.

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The dismissal of the Prime Minister gave Putin a chance to resolve the main intrigue -
Appoint one of his successors as head of the cabinet. But no. In September 2007, he appointed 65-year-old Viktor Zubkov as prime minister—another "St. Petersburger" and a member of the same "Ozero" dacha cooperative129 we discussed at length at the beginning of the book. Many were dismayed: with six months left until the elections, could Zubkov, an elderly nomenklatura official with an equally dull face, biography, and views, really become president?

The uncertainty drags on and leads to a new squabble. In October 2007, Viktor Cherkesov, Putin's comrade in the KGB and FSB, an "Athonite" and, as we recall, a graphomaniac, picks up the pen again. At that time, Cherkesov headed the Federal Drug Control Service (or FSKN), an influential law enforcement agency created by Putin at the beginning of his reign, seemingly specifically for his old comrade. Cherkesov's column, published in the Kommersant newspaper, was titled "We Must Not Allow Warriors to Turn into Traders."130 In the article, Cherkesov admitted that a "war" had unfolded in Russia.

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"Within the Chekist community." The FSB's leaders, Cherkesov wrote, are engaged in business; they have transformed from "warriors" into "merchants." This is corroding the Chekist ranks—in Cherkesov's opinion, they kept Russia from collapse in the 1990s, but now the country is once again on the brink of major problems. In short, the article was intended for just one reader—Vladimir Putin. Here's the gist.

Back in 2000, at the dawn of Putin's rule, detectives began investigating the activities of what were then Russia's largest furniture stores—Tri Kita and Grand. Investigators suspected that they were selling furniture smuggled into the country. It soon became clear that senior FSB officers, including those who had worked personally with Putin in East Germany, were possibly involved in the stores' operations, and therefore in the smuggling—it was from Germany that the furniture was primarily imported. Journalists discovered that Putin himself was also implicated in the case, allegedly meeting with the owner of Tri Kita.131 As a result, the case was stalled, and repression, on the contrary, fell upon those investigating it. In 2003,

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When Putin ran for re-election, the "Three Whales" case became relevant again. Journalist and democratic MP Yuri Shchekochikhin launched a new investigation into furniture smuggling. And, as we recall, he was murdered in the same brutal and sophisticated manner as Roman Tsepov and Alexander Litvinenko. Then came 2007, the time of the next presidential elections. The "Three Whales" case was apparently destined to resurface every time Russians voted for Putin or his successor. And each time, this story left behind the most devastating consequences. In the fall of 2007, FSB officers detained and jailed Alexander Bulbov, Cherkesov's closest subordinate at the Federal Drug Control Service, for two years. Bulbov had previously participated in the "Three Whales" investigation.

It is believed that he was responsible for wiretapping FSB officers involved in smuggling.

Cherkesov could not tolerate the arrest of his man and launched an epistolary attack. “He could be anything, but he was not a businessman,” says an acquaintance of Cherkesov, and this is probably true.132 He is one of the few “Chekists” who

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who, during their closeness to Putin, did not acquire untold wealth, company stakes, palaces, or offshore accounts. Cherkesov didn't name a single person in his article, but it was clear to everyone that he was complaining about the president's closest "Chekist," Nikolai Patrushev, director of the FSB and a longtime adviser to Putin, whom we will discuss repeatedly in the following articles.

chapters.

Putin read the article. He even commented, which is a rarity—as a rule, the Russian president doesn't discuss scandals in his entourage in public. Putin's comment suggested that Cherkesov had made a grave mistake by airing issues that shouldn't have been aired publicly. "He was literally crushed, and from then on he started having health problems," recalls an acquaintance of Cherkesov's at the time.[133] The reckoning was inevitable and swift. Before firing Cherkesov as head of the drug police, Putin, according to a participant in the story,[134] "like a man" offered his former colleague the post of ambassador to Finland. And Cherkesov, not like a man, refused, which made him

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made his disgrace even more painful. However, it was insignificant when compared to the disgraces of Tsepov and Litvinenko.

The *uncertainty* was resolved in December 2007. At the very last minute, the Kremlin staged a simple spectacle: the leaders of four parties, led by Boris Gryzlov, the speaker of the State Duma and leader of the pro-government United Russia party, showed up for a meeting with Putin. On behalf of everyone present, Gryzlov proposed nominating Medvedev as a presidential candidate. Putin could only smile and say "yes."

Now it can be argued that the entire story with the two "successors" was a show. At least one informed source claims that Putin never considered Ivanov seriously. More precisely, on the contrary, he saw him as too serious a threat to his future. "He believed that Sergei would not give him back power," the source says, emphasizing that the most important factor in Putin's antipathy was the fact that Ivanov was favored by the American administration, which considered him a more mature politician than Medvedev.135

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Putin didn't miscalculate with Medvedev. Upon assuming power in 2008, the new president's first decision was to appoint Putin prime minister, and de facto at least co-ruler. Medvedev occasionally allowed himself limited independence, but only on matters of minor political importance. Ultimately, in 2012, he meekly returned presidential power to Putin, apparently demonstrating his loyalty to his patron. Putin responded by appointing Medvedev prime minister. Our Kremlin contacts were then confident that the head of state was so grateful to Medvedev that brilliant political prospects awaited him. "Everything will definitely be fine with Dmitry Anatolyevich," said one of his Kremlin superiors. However, Putin would soon demonstrate his own, rather peculiar, understanding of loyalty.

Ironically, after Putin returned to the throne, the first one to be left out of work was Gryzlov.
The one who played the lead role in the play to nominate Medvedev for president. In fact, this politician with an unremarkable face owes his career to the fact that he attended the same school.

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With Patrushev, Putin's favorite "Chekist." Upon his rise to power, Gryzlov was first made head of the Russian police, and then promoted to fourth-ranking official in the country, formally considered the Speaker of the State Duma. In this position, he was remembered for meekly accepting laws devised in the Kremlin, justifying himself with a phrase that has entered Russian folklore: "Parliament is not a place for debate." (In reality, Gryzlov expressed himself a little more verbosely, but equally meaningfully: "The State Duma is not the place to wage political battles.") In 2012, this comical character became a liability for the country's leadership. At one meeting where the composition of the new government was being discussed, Gryzlov suddenly realized that his name had not been mentioned once. "What about me?" he asked, confused. And he received the answer: they had “forgotten about him,” but “they’ll definitely come up with something.”138 In the end, nothing of any significance for Gryzlov was ever come up with. And Putin, as if in mockery, made his KGB colleague Sergei Naryshkin speaker of the State Duma. Under him, the Duma not only failed

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a place for discussion, but it has also earned an even more offensive characterization: now the lower house of the Russian parliament is called a “mad printer” – for the speed with which it churns out the most outrageous laws.

There's more to come. Putin and the "Chekists" in his A brutal hunt for Medvedev's people was unleashed in his entourage. Here are some examples:

— **Brothers Ziyavudin** and **Magomed Magomedov,** businessmen close to Medvedev, were sentenced to 19 and 18 years in prison for creating a criminal organization.

— **Mikhail Abyzov,** a minister in Medvedev's government, was sentenced to 12 years in prison for creating a criminal organization. — **Nikita Belykh,** governor of

the Kirov region appointed under Medvedev and one of the leaders of the liberal SPS party, was sentenced to eight years in prison for bribery.

— **Akhmed Bilalov,** a businessman close to Medvedev and vice-president of the Russian Olympic Committee, was forced to flee

countries, fleeing criminal prosecution.

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Arkady **Dvorkovich,** Medvedev's closest ally and deputy prime minister in his government, was stripped of all his significant posts. A particularly telling insult was that the deputy prime minister's friends, Ziyavudin Magomedov and Mikhail Abyzov, were detained immediately after his birthday party, to which they had been invited (Magomedov in 2018, and Abyzov in 2019).

— **Konstantin Chuichenko,** Medvedev’s classmate, head of the presidential control department, and later deputy prime minister of his government, was transferred to the insignificant post of Minister of Justice.

Alexander **Konovalov,** Medvedev's student at the law school of St. Petersburg University, lost his post as Minister of Justice. Perhaps Medvedev was acutely concerned about what

was happening both to the country as a whole and to his own career. In the summer of 2014, shortly after the annexation of Crimea, the authors of this book witnessed something terribly wrong with the head of government.

In August of that year, a celebratory event was planned - Putin and Medvedev

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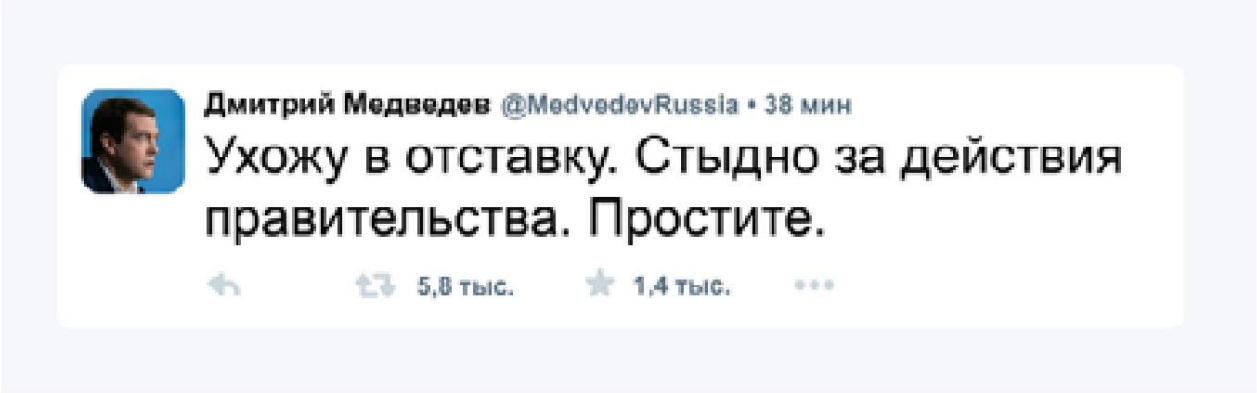
They were scheduled to meet with members of the Russian parliament in Yalta, a historic city in southern Crimea. The event was intended to symbolize the peninsula's happy return to Russia, but in reality, it revealed discord within the Russian leadership. On the morning of the celebration, an embarrassing incident occurred: Medvedev's official Twitter account suddenly posted messages expressing his shame at the government's actions, his resignation, and his view that the upcoming meeting in Yalta was pointless.



Dmitry Medvedev's Twitter, 2014

The posts continued for almost an hour, after which the government press service announced that the prime minister's account had allegedly been hacked. It's impossible to definitively confirm this as true. But the oddities don't end there.

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ended. It soon became clear that the Kremlin had banned television crews from broadcasting the event live, and news agency journalists from transmitting urgent reports from the Yalta meeting. "We received strict orders not to issue a 'flash,'" a TASS correspondent explained to us, confused. 'Flashes' are a mandatory genre for high-profile events. When someone from the country's leadership makes an important statement, journalists broadcast it with the 'flash' mark, and as especially urgent, it does not undergo editorial review. Putin's administration, of course, has absolute control over Russian state media, as we will discuss in the final part of this book, but such orders were unprecedented. The Kremlin clearly wanted to protect itself from some kind of force majeure, for example, that

in case one of the officials says something unexpected.

The strangeness continued. Everyone spoke out—Putin, State Duma Speaker Naryshkin, and the leaders of all the parties. Only Prime Minister Medvedev sat silently on stage. Putin quietly, but very familiarly, asked him, "Dim, will you say anything?" The prime minister shook his head sadly in response. What was that?

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Years later, a high-ranking government official explained to us on condition of anonymity: it turns out that shortly before his trip to Crimea, Medvedev asked Putin to resign140 .

The president did not accept the resignation, but took precautionary measures so that the one who had lost his self-
The Prime Minister didn't say anything unnecessary in public. The resignation of the country's second-ranking official on the anniversary of Crimea's "triumphant return" to Russia would have been a political uppercut for Putin, and he wanted no one to know. In the same conversation, our interlocutor sadly added: after everything that happened, Medvedev became

drink a lot.

Rumors of the former president's addiction to alcohol grew, and it seems not without reason. In 2018, when Putin was re-elected for a fourth term, Medvedev suddenly disappeared from public view for two weeks. The press service tried to attribute it to a sports injury, but the media noted that after recovering from the "injury," the prime minister spoke unnaturally slowly, fueling rumors of his drinking. Incidentally, Medvedev had no less reason to drink in 2018.

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more out of grief than when Putin arrested and fired his people. According to one of his close associates, in 2018 Medvedev was still counting on another presidential term. "Now I'll come back, then you'll become president again"—that's roughly what our interlocutor141 believes Putin told Medvedev on the eve of the 2012 elections. But the further it went, the clearer it became: in 2012

m Putin returned to power, never to give it up to anyone again, even formally.

Medvedev's subsequent political fate is tragic. In 2020, Putin fired him as prime minister, creating an honorary but meaningless post for his deputy on the Security Council. In 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, Medvedev, a former liberal, became one of the most vocal war hawks. Since Putin left him no real power, Medvedev exercises his militarism on social media. Reading his chauvinistic posts, anyone who knew Medvedev a decade ago secretly hopes that these are again the work of hackers (which, of course, is not the case). "Trying to survive in the new political reality," he sadly says.

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one of the former friends of the former president and former prime minister steals142.

We've seen time and again that Putin's morals and habits are contagious to his retinue. If the president allows himself to commit baseness or crime, why should they be taboo for those who made their careers and fortunes thanks to Putin? This rule applies equally well to such a virtue as loyalty. As the years passed, many of Putin's friends and protégés discussed in this section slowly but surely devoured each other. At the end of the book, a chart reveals the fates of most of Putin's courtiers mentioned. But one case deserves to be told now.

In June 2013, Vladimir Yakunin, the head of Russian Railways, already well known to us, according to his own words, 143 dined on wood grouse in the company of the president. This is already the second episode in the long career of this friend of Putin, in which game played an important role. For a long time, Yakunin prospered thanks to his long-standing friendship with Putin, with whom they took over Bank Rossiya back in the early 1990s. But time passed, and the friends

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Many of Putin's friends had their sights set on Russian Railways, or rather, on the gigantic contracts awarded by this state monopoly. And mysterious things began to happen to Yakunin. While he was devouring a capercaillie, news agencies broke the sensational news: the head of Russian Railways had been dismissed. Everyone was perplexed, and journalists began calling Yakunin and his aides to find out the reasons for the sudden dismissal. And then something even stranger happened. News agencies retracted the resignation report, declaring the whole thing the work of some hackers (yes, again!)144. "The news didn't spoil my appetite," Yakunin himself confidently commented when reporters finally reached him. However, in reality, the head of Russian Railways had many reasons to worry.

Maybe someone really wanted it that June to play a joke on the president's friend during the day, or perhaps Yakunin was saved by a wood grouse, the sharing of which with Putin allowed him to postpone his resignation. But not for long. Around the same time, photos of Yakunin's country estate, from which he spoke to us for the last time, appeared online.

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Once again. The photographs also showed the very same fur storage facility that had sparked particular public outrage. The photographer posed as one of the developers of luxury real estate. Whoever he really was, this someone desperately wanted to ruin Yakunin's life and career prospects. Who were these people who dared to push aside Putin's friend? It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that they were almost all of Putin's other friends—Yakunin himself once admiringly called them a "kibbutz." Among those who devoured Yakunin were the "Petersburg" Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, the "gangster" Arkady Rotenberg, and another old friend of the president, the leader of the "Petersburgers," Yuri Kovalchuk. They all wanted something from Yakunin: Rotenberg wanted to profit from Russian Railways contracts (and ultimately got them, putting his man at the head of the state-owned company), Kovalchuk was fighting for influence over Putin and for a share in Bank Rossiya (Yakunin lost his share), and Medvedev simply wanted at least someone to listen to him (Yakunin, although

and obeyed the Prime Minister, demonstratively ignoring him, preferring to communicate directly with the President over his head).

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The struggle ended in 2015, when Putin finally fired Yakunin, offering him an "honorary pension"—a senator's seat.145 And Yakunin, like Cherkesov before him, didn't act like a "man." He initially agreed, but then learned some offensive details: the state provided the senator with an ordinary Ford car and a modest office. Yakunin realized he wouldn't have his former privileges and declined the offer. So by the time of our last meeting, at the height of the pandemic, not only had Putin's former confidant ceased to hold any government positions, but he couldn't even

always hide his resentment toward the other kibbutz residents. At the end of our conversation, Yakunin unexpectedly admitted that, despite his advanced age, he still hadn't gotten vaccinated against COVID, even though both Russian and foreign vaccines were already widely used. "I'm waiting for the new vaccine," he said mysteriously. It's unlikely that a former KGB agent who converted to Orthodoxy understands virology. More likely, it was simply superstition. And that's the topic of the next chapter.

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7. Blood baths

If not in God, then who and what does the Russian elite believe in?

Orthodox lobbyists who turned out to be shrewd businessmen. Jewish friends who engage in corporate raiding. Self-serving priests. What do they actually believe in, what do they rely on in those moments when they are alone? And Putin himself—what does he truly believe in? And what does his country believe in after decades of hypocritical religiosity?

The answer to these questions is partly provided by the time when KGB officer Putin returned from Germany to the USSR—the peak of perestroika, the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. The evening routine of many Soviet, and later Russian, families of those years—everyone sitting in front of the television, lining up jars of water, tubes of cream, and toothpaste. On the screen is a gray-haired man in glasses. “The emphasis in our meeting today will be on gastrointestinal diseases,” he says in a well-trained voice. You need to relax, close your eyes, and prepare those very same jars of water, cream, and toothpaste.

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and toothpaste, the man says. Why? The speaker explains: "All this will be charged and will help you." At this point, he falls silent and waves his hands in complete silence for 15 minutes. This

It was called "making passes." In the

Soviet Union's seventh decade, its citizens were so tired of the disorganized life and widespread shortages that they expected a miracle. But not from the authorities, whom they had ceased to trust, and not from God—as we mentioned above, belief in Him had been forbidden for the previous 70 years. As a result, people believed in nonsense that was far removed from both religion and common sense.

Allan Chumak, a former sportscaster—hence his well-trained voice —began "charging" jars of water. While working in television, he planned to combat quack healers, but suddenly, in his own words, he felt a certain power within himself. This power ultimately turned Chumak himself into a quack. His "passes" were based on a simple business calculation: skin care products, and even regular medications, were in dire shortage in the country. So, when Chumak-charged creams and water went on sale, they became quite popular.

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But even more in demand in the country were the "miracle sellers" themselves. Almost simultaneously with Chumak, another television healer rose to prominence: Anatoly Kashpirovsky, a former doctor at a Ukrainian psychiatric hospital, a short-haired, athletically built man with a dark complexion and a southern accent. He didn't make passes at people—he looked at them from under his brows with a penetrating gaze, and was laconic and stern in his interactions with his "patients." Kashpirovsky not only captivated the airwaves, but also filled huge auditoriums. Music played, and Kashpirovsky hypnotized.

“I just said, ‘The stutter is gone.’ If we could see how many hundreds of people were freed from this affliction in that very second, we would all cry. If we could see hundreds of fingers moving in many paralyzed people… if we could see. I am confident of the colossal effect of our meetings,” he said forcefully.146 At that moment, the audience fell asleep, turned their heads, and some waved their arms vigorously. At one of the sessions, a sick woman

suddenly ran to the stage, throwing away her crutches. The Kashpirova Show

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The performance was reminiscent of American televangelists, but the audience didn't know it.
Such a phenomenon simply didn't exist in the USSR or Russia. Moreover, there was one key difference: the treatments prescribed by Chumak and Kashpirovsky completely lacked God.

Don't think that only the common people believed in Chumak, Kashpirovsky, and figures like them. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Kashpirovsky became a member of parliament. When Chechen militants led by field commander Shamil Basayev captured over a thousand hostages in the town of Budyonnovsk in 1995, the hypnotist was included among the negotiators. In other words, he seemed a suitable figure for both the secular rulers in Moscow and the Islamic fundamentalist Basayev. Later, the negotiators would recall that Kashpirovsky attempted to hypnotize the terrorists but left Budyonnovsk after receiving a call from then-FSB director Sergei Stepashin. Ultimately, most of the hostages would be released, a fact Kashpirovsky would attribute to his own talents.

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If charlatans had nested only in parliament, the situation would have been so bad. But they also occupied far more important positions. In the early 1990s, the "Stargazer" appeared in the Kremlin—the not-so-coincidental nickname of the first deputy head of the Presidential Security Service, Georgy Rogozin. He was fascinated by astrology, hypnosis, and even, according to his own claim, could, through suggestion, immerse people in the past, some 135,000 years back, to the time of the Neanderthals.148 By the end of Yeltsin's first term, the Stargazer's influence in the Kremlin was so great that presidential security personnel were selected based on the phase of the moon, and the head of state was allegedly assigned agents capable of "warding off evil spirits" (what kind of special agents these were, or whether they even existed, remains unclear).149

Around the same time, a career began in Russia.
The story of another, to put it mildly, strange politician. Chess fans may know Kirsan Ilyumzhinov as the long-time head of FIDE, the International Chess Federation. He was not only a sports functionary—for many years, Ilyumzhinov led Kalmykia, a poor republic.

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by the public in southern Russia. He was remembered for corruption, but not only for that. Everyone in Russia knew him as a man who meets aliens. This is how this important statesman described his contact with aliens, which, according to him, happened in September 1997.

“It was just on Saturday… I was already falling asleep. I felt the balcony open and someone was calling me. I walked over and saw a translucent tube, and I walked into it. I saw people in yellow spacesuits. People often ask me what language I spoke. Probably at the level of thoughts, because there wasn’t enough oxygen. Then there was a tour of this ship. They even said that now they needed to take samples from a certain planet. Then there was a conversation: ‘Why don’t you go live and say that you’re here?’ They said they weren’t ready for the meeting. Then they sent me back the same way.”150

Ilyumzhinov has been developing for many years
He spoke of his contacts with extraterrestrial intelligence and sometimes became confused. For example, sometimes he couldn't remember exactly how many times he had seen aliens—as if such a thing, even if it were true, could be forgotten. But this didn't bother anyone. Afterwards

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After the first revelation about the meeting with an alien, Ilyumzhinov led his region for another 10 years without encountering the Kremlin's mistrust.

If Ilyumzhinov were the only Russian politician to communicate with extraterrestrial intelligence, it might be considered a historical oddity. But the situation is far worse. Yevgeny Savchenko is one of the most famous governors of the Putin era. He spent six consecutive terms (27 years!) leading not impoverished Kalmykia, but the Belgorod region—a prosperous region on the border between Russia and Ukraine. And for many years, he communicated confidentially not only with Putin, but also with… God himself.

In 2012, after a public event, a man who identified himself as Nikolai approached the governor and suddenly asked if he wanted to know what God thought of him. Savchenko agreed (of course!), and Nikolai immediately called a certain Lyubov. It was she who acted as an intermediary between the governor and Monoston—that's what she called God. The mediation took place immediately.

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"Dear son, he doesn't feel Me spiritually, but he's a bright man and knows how to get things done. I would take him as My assistant if he would start listening to Nikolai," this is how God spoke about Savchenko, according to the woman.

The governor was so impressed that he began communicating regularly with Lyubov and even wrote a book about his conversations with God and his messenger, tellingly titled "Shock."151 Everything described above is a brief summary of the beginning of this book. There's much more to come. The intermediary between God and the governor, according to the latter, is already living on Earth in her tenth incarnation, and in her first, she was the mother of John the Baptist. When Monoston contacts the woman, her hand automatically jots down "His words" in a notebook, after which Lyubov retypes them on her computer. Savchenko soon discovered that the woman can also communicate with the souls of the dead, which led him to converse with Anton Chekhov and Rembrandt van Rijn.

If Putin were a sincere zealot of the Orthodox faith, he would hardly have tolerated such

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The stories of his subordinates: they too clearly contradict church canons. But it seems that the Russian president, who himself formed as a politician during the time of Kashpirovsky and Chumak, is no stranger to superstition. While researching this book, we asked one of his longtime acquaintances what Putin believed in. The interviewee paused and said, "He doesn't shy away from superstition... Within reasonable limits."152 He then recalled one of his walks with Putin in early 2000, when he had just become president. Discussing state affairs, the two were strolling through the head of state's country residence. A black cat crossed their path, and, to the guest's

surprise, Putin quickly crossed himself. There was nothing particularly unusual about his reaction, but these days, most people tend to laugh at such an old superstition. And of course, church canon does not require crossing oneself at the sight of a cat - on the contrary, Orthodoxy condemns superstition.

Putin sometimes jokes about his superstitions, but he often indulges in them. For example, when discussing the future, he often symbolically

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He spits over his shoulder and mutters, "Knock on wood," something they do when they're afraid of jinxing something. We wouldn't be citing these rather amusing anecdotes if we hadn't discovered that the Russian leader also shares stranger, and sometimes even cruel, beliefs.

After becoming president, Putin became close to a man who will be discussed repeatedly in this book. The world now knows Sergei Shoigu as the former Russian Defense Minister, who led the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. But at the dawn of Putin's rule, Shoigu was far from the new head of state—he was neither a "St. Petersburger," nor a "Chekist," nor a "bandit." He was born in the remote Siberian region of Tuva.

a place as beautiful as it is impoverished, where a railway still hasn't been built, and the alcoholism rate is higher than anywhere else in Russia. Nevertheless, Shoigu trained as an engineer, rose to become Minister of Emergency Situations, and, even under Boris Yeltsin, became one of the most popular Russian politicians. It was precisely because of this latter circumstance that Putin not only couldn't ignore him, but also began to pursue

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Time was running out for him—the president and the minister vacationed together in Siberia time after time. Putin's favor, in turn, allowed Shoigu to become incredibly rich and secure a long career.

And if Putin opened the door to a world of corruption and wealth for Shoigu, the minister himself opened the gates to something cruel and primal for the president. This refers to an ancient Siberian rite, practiced since ancient times by the inhabitants of the Altai Mountains. A species of deer called marals lives there. In the spring, during the mating season, their antlers begin to grow at an incredible rate—several centimeters per day. Locals ascribe healing properties to the antlers, or velvet antlers, of the marals—they are believed to slow aging and increase potency. This is how the locals developed the tradition of taking baths with deer antler extract (and now there are even medicines made from antlers).

The problem is that the antlers do not have time to mature. The antlers are still soft and filled with blood. Cruel methods are used to obtain them: the deer are clamped on a special machine,

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The animals are raised so that they dangle helplessly, and their growing antlers are sawed off by hand—without anesthesia and often without disinfection. The frightened animals are then released, but, having experienced pain and stress, many soon die.153 The antlers obtained in this way are quickly put to good use and bring in a good profit—they are boiled, and the resulting extract is added to baths and medicines. In the mid-2000s, Shoigu brought Putin to Altai and convinced him to take a deer blood bath. One of Putin's acquaintances claims that some of the president's doctors did not recommend antler baths because there is a suspicion that deer blood, rich in stem cells, provokes cancer.154 But this did not stop Putin—longevity and potency, apparently, seemed to him enough of a lottery win. The fascination with the bloody ritual immediately captured Putin's subordinates—ministers, mayors, and heads of huge state corporations immerse themselves in antler baths. The management of Gazprom, the world's largest gas company, transports barrels of deer blood from Altai to Moscow on a...

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It's gotten to the point that baths with pantocrine (the name of a substance extracted from maral blood) are offered to guests of the Rus sanatorium in Sochi. This Kremlin-owned establishment includes a villa where Putin occasionally holds meetings with foreign dignitaries (for example, in 2023, with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan).

Over the years, the number of obscurantists around Putin, as well as the degree of their madness, has grown dramatically. Inanity has become routine in the Kremlin. It's so natural that it's impossible to determine whether officials sincerely believe the strangest things or exploit popular superstitions for their own political ends. A typical example is Nikolai Patrushev, whom we call Putin's favorite security officer. The president once said that he has a "camaraderie" with this man (besides him, there are also...

the head of state had this feeling only with his “successors” – Medvedev and Ivanov). It is therefore all the more important to know that Patrushev is either a convinced or pretended proponent of the most incredible conspiracy theories. “World rulers,” “the golden billion,” “the role of the United States in the development of

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"The coronavirus pathogen" - all these are the topics of Patrushev's real speeches and interviews.

The density of obscurantists around Putin is demonstrated by the fact that among them is Boris Gryzlov, Patrushev's former classmate and protégé, the very same State Duma Speaker for whom Putin failed to find a worthy position after 2011. Two state-level obscurantists from the same class—I'd like to meet their teachers. In Gryzlov's case, his chemistry teacher clearly underperformed. It happened like this. One day, the State Duma Speaker attended an interview with the authors of this book. He declined the offer of a glass of water, but whispered something to his assistant. The assistant pulled out a special thermos of water from his briefcase—as it quickly became clear, also special water. Not long before, Gryzlov and a certain scientist, Viktor Petrik, announced that they had solved a problem that the world's best laboratories had failed to solve. They patented a filter that was supposedly capable of purifying contaminated water (including radioactive water) on an industrial scale to make it potable. This was all the more surprising because Petrik did not have a specialized education - he studied at the Lenin-

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He graduated from the Department of Psychology at St. Petersburg State University. Like Chumak and Kashpirovsky, Petrik was interested in hypnosis, may have collaborated with the KGB for a time (at least, he hinted as much to journalists155) , and even managed to spend time in prison for attempted robbery. In the 1990s, Petrik worked as an advisor to the St. Petersburg mayor's office, and in the 2000s, he began making "discoveries" in various fields of science simultaneously. Simply put, Petrik is a charlatan and a repeat offender. Gryzlov, however, didn't just co-author his work. He initiated a program to purchase filters at government expense, which would cost the treasury nearly $170 million at the then exchange rate. Very soon, real scientists from the Academy of Sciences discovered156 that all of Gryzlov and Petrik's "discoveries" were a sham, conflicting with a whole set of physical and chemical laws (yes, Russian scientists back then could still contradict Boris Gryzlov and, as we recall, Mikhail Kovalchuk, as well as other Putin cronies), as a result of which the idea of spending state money on inoperative filters failed. It's not entirely clear what motivated Gryzlov—self-interest or stupidity.

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to say one thing: refusing ordinary water in favor of special water during the interview, the fourth
The man in the country looked like someone who sincerely believed in nonsense.

In the summer of 2016, Putin attended the United Russia party congress. A little-known activist from Penza found herself in the seat next to him.

with a very common first and last name in Russia - Anna Kuznetsova. Until then, only provincial media had written about her, one of which Kuznetsova once told: women should have as few sexual partners as possible (ideally, no more than one). She

She referred to telegony, which she called a "relatively new science," although in fact this pseudoscientific concept was born back in the 19th century. "We can say that the cells of the uterus have an information-wave memory. Therefore, these cells remember everything that happened in them. For example, if a woman has had several partners, then there is a high probability of giving birth to a weakened child due to the mixing of information"157 - every sentence in this comment has long been refuted by science, but Putin

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Such reasoning didn't seem to deter anyone. Quite the opposite. In personalist

regimes, a number of people who have served time

A person living in a house with a dictator can expect a promotion. This is what happened this time too—shortly after the meeting, the president appointed Kuznetsova his commissioner... for children's rights, and five years later, he also made her deputy speaker of the State Duma. But the most astonishing example is that of deputy Igor

Ananskikh, a former successful businessman. For several years, the parliamentarian published articles in a Russian scientific journal of, let's say, murky content.158 It's hardly possible to clearly recount everything he wrote, especially since the series of articles covers

almost the entire period of human existence. The author begins literally from the origins - in one work he reports that the first on Earth were human-like robots, which were invented by the spirit of Sabaoth (who is meant is not entirely clear - in the Tanakh and the Old Testament this is what God is called) and landed them on Earth. But at some point, the "children of heaven" also appeared, and their first rubber-

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Rus' became the dominant force (the same article notes that the white race is the most ancient on Earth). Another article reveals that all living beings are divided into "people of the Earth" (created in the image of God) and "beastmen" (created with the help of space genetic technologies). If we move on to our time, after the collapse of the USSR, Russia was under the external control of a certain World Ocean, and other countries were ruled by a "world government" (Patrushev is not alone in his ideas). Moreover, now the "world government"

"The State" is trying to transfer power to the "reptilians," and the Vatican is creating material for immortality using children's blood. And sex is involved. In her reasoning about this, the deputy goes further than Kuznetsova and writes about cosmic-scale nonsense.

Tew: sperm from all partners accumulates in women's spinal cords, Russians give birth to unhealthy children from Black people, and oral sex, a product of democracy, promotes cancer. To summarize, Anansky's ideas are even more senseless and inhumane than the tenets of QAnon.

There's too much symbolism in this story. Not only is the distinguished member of parliament

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He turned out to be an idiot with a rudimentary understanding of the world. It also turned out that his colleagues, for whom loyalty was more important than common sense, had ignored this for years. It's also surprising that Ananskikh's insane notes were published for years by a scientific journal (not a psychiatric one!) that valued servility above its own reputation. Incidentally, it was the journal that was ultimately held responsible. When journalists discovered

Ananskikh's articles, the deputy pretended he hadn't written any of them, but the journal mistakenly listed his name among the authors time and again.159

How do Russians feel about all this obscurantism? In the third decade of Putin's rule, polls show that about 2% of citizens go to church weekly,160 but under the evil eye

And more than half believe in some form of damage.161 Behind these percentages, one can sometimes discern the destinies of specific people, distorted because someone at the top believes in absurd things. In 2019, an unknown resident of Yakutia, Alexander Gabyshev, called himself a "warrior shaman" and declared that God had commanded him to exorcise

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Mona—Vladimir Putin. To do this, the shaman decided to walk more than 8,000 kilometers—from a remote region of Siberia to Moscow. Gabyshev's journey attracted media attention, and along the way, like Forrest Gump in the film of the same name, like-minded people began to join him. Six months later, when Gabyshev had walked about 3,000 kilometers, Putin's own agency —the FSB—became interested in him. A case was opened against the shaman for inciting extremism, and he was forcibly sent to a psychiatric hospital, where he remains undergoing compulsory treatment. This is even more symbolic than it might seem at first glance. Even the Soviet authorities actively used psychiatric hospitals to suppress dissent—dissidents were often sent there, conveniently declared insane and subjected to torture under the guise of treatment. Putin and his cronies, who themselves believe in completely insane ideas, have revived this practice.

Is it worth mentioning the fates of the other heroes of this chapter after this? Nothing supernatural happened to them. Healer Allan Chumak

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He died, and the healer Anatoly Kashpirovsky aged beyond recognition. Their period of popularity is long gone, but new charlatans are constantly replacing each other in their place.

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Part two

Love and Marriage

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1. Striptease for nomenclature

How Putin Created and Destroyed a Family

Voznesensky Prospekt is the very center of St. Petersburg, beginning at St. Isaac's Cathedral, one of the most beautiful churches in Russia, and stretching to the Fontanka Embankment. On both sides of the avenue are pre-revolutionary apartment buildings and faceless institutions in the style of Soviet brutalism. In one of these gray buildings, a completely un-Soviet establishment opened in the 1990s. It was a strip club. It was called "Luna." In addition to a stage with a pole, there was a restaurant, a bar, a dance floor, and rooms on the second floor for intimate encounters with strippers. When the Soviet Union collapsed, taboos collapsed not only on private business but also on sexual entertainment. Strip bars, like regular bars, were popping up everywhere then, but "Luna" was a special place. A native St. Petersburg resident, Maxim Freidzon, recalls that this establishment was considered elite.

nym162. Freidzon had been to Luna more than once, but, surprisingly, on business, not for pleasure. The fact is that in this strip bar in the early 90s

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Vladimir Putin held business meetings there. Freidzon met with Dmitry Skigin, an acquaintance and business partner of the future president, at Luna—we'll definitely tell you more about Skigin later. Once, Freidzon recalls, in the middle of the day he met Putin, then deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, at a table. Another time, Putin was even noticed at Luna by journalists. For example, Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported how he, along with other Russian government officials, visited Luna on the evening of December 25, 1999. The group had come specifically for the nighttime erotic show "Moon Fairytale," the newspaper wrote. For the future president of Russia, this place was “like home,” recalls another of our interlocutors, who worked in the St. Petersburg government at the time, and adds: even the people of Roman Tsepov, Putin’s personal bodyguard, “protected” Luna164.

Another source says that even in the early 2000s, when Putin was already president, there was much in Luna that was reminiscent of the VIP’s past.
client.

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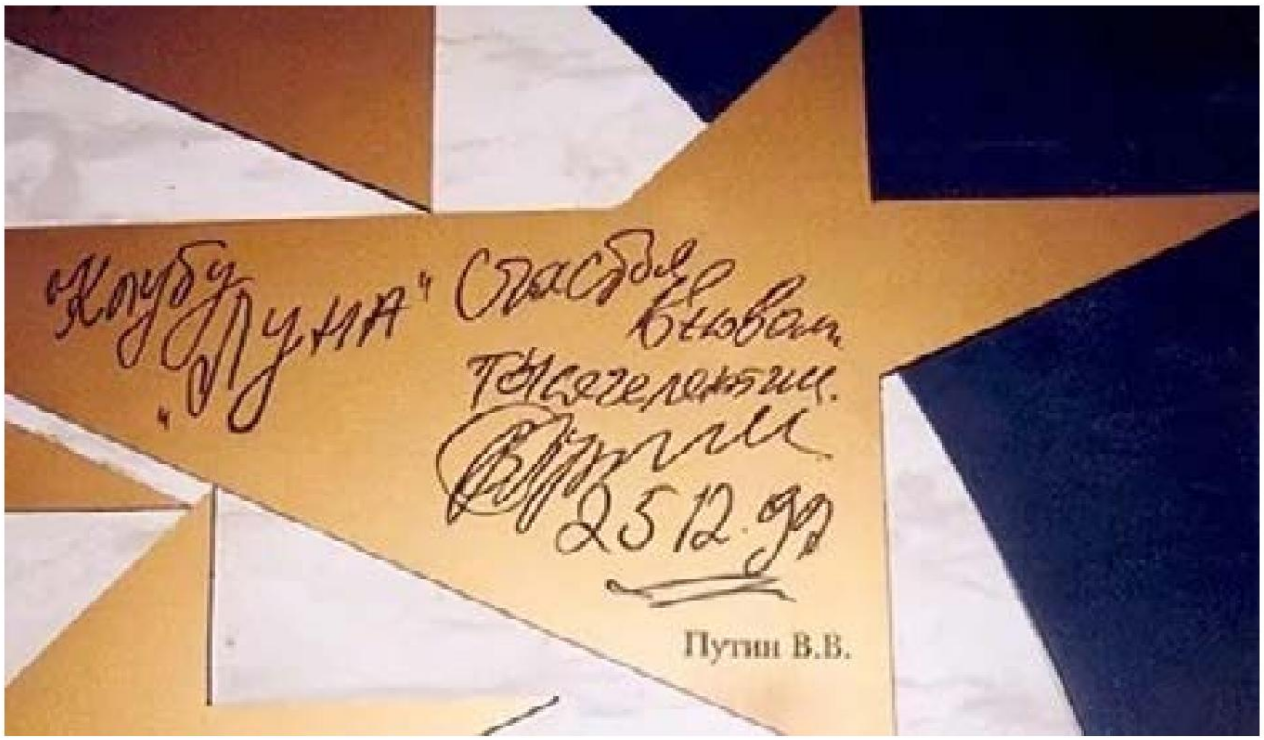

The owner of Luna kept Putin's autograph in a prominent place - as proof of the establishment's high status

Besik Pipia/ RIA Novosti

This kind of advertising worked—just 20 years ago, Luna was considered the best striptease venue in St. Petersburg. "When I ended up there around 2003, it was like... a striptease for the party nomenklatura. Poles, velvet, and a Soviet spirit," recalls a source.165 In short, the young official of a young democratic country chose a unique location for his business meetings.

We don't know for sure whether Putin retained his passion for stripping after becoming the head of state.

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state. But we know for sure that by the mid-90s, when he moved from St. Petersburg to Moscow, the future president was not a Soviet man—he was addicted to the fruits of capitalism, he knew the value of the good life and entertainment. We also know that he was not an exemplary

family man.

Putin married a woman five years his junior in 1983. Her name was Lyudmila Shkrebneva, and when she met Putin, she was working as a flight attendant on domestic airlines. Lyudmila was an active woman; she performed in the theater, played the piano, earned a degree in philology, and spoke Spanish and, later, German. However, soon after their wedding, she had to put her work and hobbies aside: in 1985 and 1986, the Putins had two daughters, Maria and Ekaterina (she would later use the name Katerina), one after the other. Furthermore, shortly after the birth of their first daughter, the family moved to East Germany—Putin was the only one working there, while his wife spent her time running the household and socializing with the wives of Soviet spies and diplomats (often the same people).

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How did the family of spy Putin live? As a rule, almost nothing is known about the personal lives of spies.

It's well known that their secrecy extends beyond work. But in Putin's case—and this is surprising!—we know quite a bit. The fact is that the only spy in their family (both by profession and by vocation) was the husband, while the wife, on the contrary, did a great deal to "expose" this spy. Almost everything that will be said below about the Putin family is based on open sources—

memoirs of Lyudmila herself, her friend and biographers. And these are very painful memories.

knowledge.

Vladimir and Lyudmila's marriage was, to some extent, a misalliance. After becoming the president's wife, Lyudmila described her first meeting with her future husband: "Volodya was standing on the steps <…> of the checkout counter. He was dressed very modestly, I would even say poorly. He was so plain, I wouldn't even have noticed him on the street."166 Such recollections of the young Putin are not the only ones. His classmates and fellow students also recalled that Putin looked plain and

was not popular among girls.

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"We chose the more spirited guys," said his classmate Irina Podnosova, whom the president would never forget and many years later appoint as Chairperson of the Supreme Court.167 She also once described Putin in almost the same words as his wife: "While all the girls came practically in evening gowns, and the guys in smart suits, Putin was dressed modestly—in a green shirt and jumper."168 The nondescript Leningrader Vladimir

and the attractive newcomer Lyudmila met in 1980 at a concert by Arkady Raikin, the most famous Soviet stand-up comedian. Friends brought them to the concert—they took them along for company. Volodya and Lyusya then dated for another three years, during which time they had many arguments. For over a year, young Putin didn't even admit to his girlfriend that he worked for the KGB (she learned about it from a friend). This secrecy hurt Lyudmila. Putin's attitude toward his chosen one during their courtship is an incurable trauma for her. She won't hesitate to admit this trauma even in one of the official biographies of President Putin, authored by Oleg Blotsky. He began working on his book after

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The journalists who wrote the book "First Person"—we've already cited it several times—were sanctioned by the Kremlin. Both biographies were granted personal access to Putin and his family members, friends, and colleagues. It's all the more surprising, then, to discover these recollections of the First Lady in Blotsky's book, published in 2001:

"Dates are a special story. I was never late for them, but Volodya was always late. An hour and a half was the norm. <…> I remember standing on the subway. The first fifteen minutes."

I can handle being late normally, half an hour -
It seems okay, too. But when an hour passes and he's still not here, you just cry from resentment. And after an hour and a half, you don't feel any emotions at all...169

These latenesses continued for years. Much later, President Putin would make it a rule to be late for any meeting—even all three of his audiences with the Pope. However, his treatment of Lyudmila seemed particularly humiliating. When she became pregnant with her second daughter, the following episode occurred:

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— The absence of a husband during pregnancy who could help me with something was not a problem for me, since I have been quite independent since childhood. <…> Imagine: I am seven months pregnant with Katya, Masha in one hand, a bag of groceries in the other, and on foot
The sixth floor. Then a husband and wife *(the neighbors – author's note)* come out onto the landing and see me climbing up. A silent scene. The man's eyes grew very, very wide. All he could manage to exhale was: "Lyuda, is this even possible?" Then the man grabs Masha, her bag, and carries them up to the sixth floor. But that was only once. And I have at least three such trips a day. Later, I know, the neighbor said to my husband several times: "Volodya, you have to help. You have to help, Volodya!" But it didn't have much effect, because

Vladimir Vladimirovich had a principle: a woman in the house should do everything herself170.

Presidential biographers admitted that Putin's wife was a very talkative conversationalist. She would sit up late with Blotsky while Putin was working late. When the book was published, Lyudmila sent a car and driver.

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to pick up several dozen copies. Her sincerity and her grievances are evident in these pages.
nitsa very clearly:

"Volodya comes over for dinner, for example. Naturally, I set the table. My husband eats. I wait with bated breath for a reaction. There isn't one. 'How's the meat?' I can't resist. 'It's a bit dry.' For me, it's like a knife to the heart. I tried so hard, went out especially for the meat, then cooked it. You could say I poured my heart out. And—it's a bit dry!"171

Only the Putins themselves can say exactly when their family life began to crumble. But we have ample evidence that by the mid-1990s, when Putin was holding business meetings in a strip bar, theirs was already a deeply unhappy family. A unique source confirming this is a book by Putin's friend, a German woman named Irene Pietsch. They met in 1995 during Lyudmila's tourist trip to Hamburg, where Pietsch still lives. A relationship developed, and Irene saw the Putins (both in Russia and Germany) over the course of three years. Her last conversation with Lyudmila took place in 1998, when Vladimir was appointed head of the FSB.

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"Lyudmila's pain from countless humiliations was overwhelming. What she spoke of wasn't a simple melodrama, with which she seemed to want to tell the story of her entire life—it was the bitter tragedy of a failed friendship, which, for her, couldn't withstand Lyudmila's fundamental principle of "all or nothing" and ultimately ended in betrayal."

This photo shows Vladimir and Lyudmila Putin with their newborn daughter Maria in 1985. The Putins would soon leave for East Germany. Once in Germany, the young couple would likely experience some family problems.

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life. It would later emerge: Lyudmila complained to one of her friends in Dresden that her husband was cheating on her and sometimes beating her. As Dr. Erich Schmidt-Enboom, a leading researcher on the history of German intelligence during the Cold War, told the authors of this book, Lyudmila Putina's experiences became known because her acquaintance turned out to be an employee of the Soviet mission recruited by the West German intelligence agency, the BND. The archives related to this episode remain classified, but the researcher relies on the accounts of two BND sources, including the former director of that intelligence agency, Hans-Georg Wieck.

The quoted phrase is full of drama—especially against the light, feminine tone of much of the book. Irene then goes on to paint a fascinating portrait of Putin during his time in Moscow, citing Lyudmila's words: he values comfort and luxurious interiors ("vases, beautiful tableware"), loves whiskey, and seriously discusses with his wife the prospects of "additional income" if he accepts a position in the presidential administration in 1996. Putin is a "vampire," his eyes like "two predators lying in wait for prey," Pitch writes.

How Vladimir *betrayed* Lyudmila, Irene Pitch did not reports. But we can tell you about this.

1975. Gorokhovaya Street in the center of St. Petersburg was then named after Felix Dzerzhinsky,

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The founder of the Soviet secret services, and the city itself was named after Lenin, Dzerzhinsky's boss. A fair-haired girl named Svetlana Krivonogikh was born here. She spent many years in a communal apartment with her parents. The family lived very poorly; her father was a heavy drinker and died early. After finishing school, Svetlana worked part-time as a cleaner. In the mid-1990s, she entered university, but her classmates don't remember her—they never saw her in class or at her graduation ceremony.

The fact is that Svetlana's other, secret life was developing in parallel. More precisely, her life together with Vladimir Putin. Two former government officials who knew the president spoke about this affair, and two of his close friends, when asked about Krivonogikh, answered pointedly: "We won't say anything about her."174 We don't know for sure when and under what circumstances the 20-year-old girl from a

poor family met an already wealthy man 23 years her senior. Two people who knew Svetlana in her youth recall that sometime in the 1990s she got together with a "official from the St. Petersburg mayor's office." One of the interlocutors derogatorily

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He called this man "sugar daddy"175. Putin's old acquaintances and bodyguards, Viktor Zolotov and Roman Tsepov, could have probably brought the girl to him. The fact is that Zolotov also started a secret family at that time, in the second half of the 1990s. He got together with the young Dina Tsilevich (she would later inherit the security company that Tsepov and Zolotov founded in the 1990s),

We talked about their friendship in the first part and will talk about it again). Tsilevich and Krivonogikh were girlfriends176. So the two friends, Putin and Zolotov, acquired secret passions - Krivonogikh and Tsilevich. In the database of Russian air flights that have become publicly available, one can find

The couples' joint travel between Moscow and St. Petersburg was monitored.177 The flights date back to 1999, when Putin was director of the FSB, the country's main intelligence agency, and held state secrets. At the same time, his wife, Lyudmila, had severed ties with her German girlfriend, Irene Pietsch, for the sake of secrecy.178 However, security concerns did not prevent Putin from traveling around the country in the company of his young admirer without access to state secrets.

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Svetlana, by all accounts, had captured Putin's heart. As soon as she graduated from university, the president's friends began showering her with gifts: first, she received a position at Bank Rossiya, and soon, a stake in its capital. This was followed by royal gifts—Svetlana and her family received expensive apartments across the country from Putin's inner circle. The Krivonogikh family's real estate and business assets are currently valued at approximately $100 million.

By the way, about business assets. Among other things Putin's friends registered the expensive Igora ski resort near St. Petersburg in Svetlana's name. In 2013, it was at Igora that Putin held the wedding ceremony of Katerina, his daughter from his official marriage. How often have you seen a father walk his daughter down the aisle in a place he secretly gifted to his mistress? Perhaps this story testifies either to the highly sophisticated relationships within Putin's family or to the depravity of the Russian president. Ahead, you'll find facts that will prove it's most likely the latter.

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We don't know what the date 03.03.03 (March 3, 2003) means to numerology buffs, but for Putin, it's the birthday of his third daughter, Elizaveta. She was born to Svetlana Krivonogikh in a St. Petersburg clinic and immediately became a state secret. Information about the father (except for his name, Vladimir) was removed from the child's birth record, and soon the girl was given documents under a false name—

Rozova. Under this name—Elizaveta Rozova—

She lived there for over 20 years. On her social media, she posted photos of herself in luxurious interiors: sometimes in apartments gifted to her mother by Putin's friends, sometimes in the business jet on which Putin's mistress and her family traveled around the world (in 2023, Svetlana Krivonogikh was subject to British sanctions as a shareholder of Bank Rossiya, which likely restricted her travel).

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Second families and illegitimate children are not a new theme in world history, including when it comes to heads of state. In another situation, such a fact might not be worthy of public attention, but in Putin's case, this story speaks volumes. You can find it online.

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Find an interesting video. In May 2003, two months after the birth of their illegitimate daughter, Vladimir and Lyudmila Putin, accompanied by Viktor Zolotov, who would soon have an illegitimate son with Dina Tsilevich, flew to St. Petersburg for a children's party. The Kremlin released a recording of the event, showing a smiling Lyudmila Putin dancing with young people to an obscene song by the punk band Leningrad. Yet another episode from Russian history, more like a phantasmagoria. It would be even more phantasmagorical if we assume that that same evening, Putin and Zolotov went to their second families, hidden from public view in expensive St. Petersburg apartments.

But this video is not fiction, but a Russian reality in 2003. Putin had just launched his reelection campaign. He needed to portray himself as a loving husband, and once again he pretended to be someone he wasn't. In 2003 and early 2004, Lyudmila Putina made numerous public appearances.

She went on business trips with her husband and alone.

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night. They both smiled, feigning well-being. No one should have questioned the moral principles of such a president. Vladimir and Lyudmila fulfilled their role—in 2004, Putin was re-elected with over 71% of the vote.

Did Lyudmila Putina know about her husband's secret affair back then? Almost certainly. As you may recall, at the beginning of this book, we described how Putin, having moved to Moscow, hid with his mistress in the apartment of his assistant, Igor Sechin. Lyudmila also learned of this encounter then. There is reason to believe that the woman in Sechin's apartment was indeed Svetlana Krivonogikh, who at the time was regularly flying to Moscow to visit her high-ranking boyfriend.

Since his second presidential term, the theme of family and children has become one of the main topics in Putin's rhetoric. In 2007, he introduced the so-called "maternity capital"—a financial incentive for having children. 2008 was declared the year of support for families and children, which included a major PR campaign promoting family values.

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relationships. By 2012, so-called "traditional family values" had already become the core of Putin's new ideology. Of course, this ideology is entirely false, as we'll discuss later, but for now, let's describe the fates of some of the characters in this chapter.

Lyudmila Putina, as you already know, divorced the Russian president only in 2013. During the last years of their marriage, their marriage was as false as Putin's phrases about family values. Putin dated and cohabited with other women, and Lyudmila also had a young suitor named Artur Ocheretny (she married him after her divorce from Putin). But the true end of this family happened much earlier. It happened like this. June 2004, Putin, who had just been re-elected, and his wife were flying to Mexico. A long flight, then tense meetings—Vladimir and Lyudmila were tired, not to mention the unhealthy psychological background in the family. And then an old acquaintance came to their hotel room. This man's name was Igor Shadkhan. He was noticeably older than Putin; they had known each other since the early 1990s, when Shadkhan,

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A documentary filmmaker was filming a TV show about the St. Petersburg mayor's office. One of the show's subjects was a young Vladimir Putin—it was his first appearance on screen.

Still from the film "Power" by Igor Shadkhan, 1991

Since then, Shadkhan and Putin have become close friends. Shadkhan made several more documentaries about Putin, but over time, his fascination with Russia's new president began to fade. It got to the point that Shadkhan's two films about Putin,

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Filmed during the president's first term for state television, Shad Khan decided to take a desperate step—he asked for an audience with Putin. This became possible in 2004, during a visit by the Russian delegation to Mexico. The director ended up in the same place as Putin, largely by chance. He had flown to Mexico City to film a movie about the brilliant Soviet ethnographer Yuri Knorozov. The story that follows is based on the words of an acquaintance of Shad Khan's, as well as the memoirs of his widow (the director died in 2014). Three people were present at the morning meeting in a Mexican hotel: the Putins and the director. Shad Khan was explaining to his old acquaintance that the country was moving in the wrong direction, and that Putin was showing signs of an autocrat. And then something happened that the guest didn't expect. Lyudmila became hysterical, and she and Shadkhan began to argue with her husband that he shouldn't have run for another presidential term. Lyudmila was practically in tears. Putin was distraught—as was Shadkhan. The director left the hotel, realizing he had witnessed a scene he shouldn't have seen.

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It is also clear that Lyudmila’s fate is deplorable, since she brought to light family disagreements on a fundamental issue for Putin – his undivided power over Russia.

Shadkhan turned out to be right: everything he filmed since then has been subject to an unspoken Kremlin ban. The aforementioned biographies of Putin—Blotsky's works, Pitch's, and even the book "First Person," the most innocuous of them all—will also be subject to the same ban. Hiding and distorting the biographies of leaders has been a long-standing tradition of Russian dictators, from Vladimir Lenin to Vladimir Putin. We will discuss this phenomenon separately in the final section of the book.

But Svetlana Krivonogikh's fate turned out quite well, even though her affair with the Russian president ended more than ten years ago. Svetlana still owns numerous properties and companies gifted to her by Putin. Another smirk in Russian history is the fact that among the assets gifted to Svetlana Krivonogikh was the St. Petersburg club "Leningrad Center," which now hosts strip shows. Are these performances similar?

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Only Putin can speak for himself about the events that once took place at the Luna strip bar, but his press secretary refuses to comment on any topics related to the president's personal life. The Luna bar closed long ago, and its regulars either rose to prominence (like Putin and some of his acquaintances) or fell into disgrace due to a falling out with the latter (as happened with Maxim Freidzon, whose fate we will return to later).

Finally, Elizaveta Rozova has grown into a pretty girl, bearing a more than subtle resemblance to her father. When we first described her mother's fate in a journalistic investigation in late 2020, Liza wasn't the least bit perturbed. Not only did she keep her social media accounts open, but she even became more active, flaunting her family's newfound fame. However, she consistently refuses to answer questions about who her father is. It's a state secret, after all. Russian society also seems to have paid no attention to its leader's immorality, despite Putin for years forcing citizens to believe in "traditional family values." This is the logical outcome of any policy based on hypocrisy.

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2. We don’t have sex!

How two moralities emerged in Russia
for the people and for the elite

If only it were just a matter of the hypocrisy of Vladimir Putin and his courtiers! The campaign they launched to promote the "traditional family" has brought many very real troubles to Russia—

We will only talk about some of them in this
heads.

The demographic situation in Russia since the 1990s has left much to be desired. The reasons for this were both global (the country, like most industrialized countries, was experiencing the so-called "second demographic transition," characterized by a noticeable decline in the birth rate) and purely internal. Poverty, poor healthcare, population outflow, alcoholism and other addictions, crime, and wars—all this led to the fact that by the beginning of Putin's rule in 2000, the annual natural population decline (that is, the negative difference between the number of deaths and births) exceeded 950 thousand people.182 "Russia is

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"He's doing well," was how newspapers of the time typically wrote. The oil boom of the early 21st century and the resulting rise in household incomes, as well as certain government measures during Putin's first terms, improved the situation somewhat: women began having more children, and people in their prime died less often in car accidents and drunken brawls. True, the population problem was no less mitigated by the influx of migrants from the poor but densely populated regions of the former USSR—Central Asia and the Caucasus (many migrants who came to Russia to work started families and received Russian citizenship). Paradoxically, some improvement in the demographic situation occurred not thanks to, but in spite of, Putin's policy of strengthening the "traditional family." In 2012, Putin proposed the concept

of "spiritual bonds," part of which included the fight for "family values." By that time, Russia had managed to achieve a demographic surplus for the first time this century for a very brief period—the population had grown, not decreased, over the course of a year. But then the situation reversed itself again. Since 2012, the birth rate has stagnated.

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at a level of 13 babies per year per thousand inhabitants, and since 2016 this figure has begun to fall again183. The deteriorating economic situation, new wars, the growth of government-sponsored chauvinism and the associated outflow of migrants -

All this combined has led to the country's population once again declining annually. "Russia is in a demographic pit," newspapers repeat, while the authorities are coming up with ever newer and increasingly inhumane ideas for "salvation" from this pit. In 2023, the State Duma began discussing a ban on abortions, and the Ministry of Health urged women to give birth as early as possible, without wasting time on higher education and careers.

The headline "We Don't Have Sex!" is a phrase uttered by Soviet woman Lyudmila Ivanova in 1986. Perestroika had just begun in the USSR, and the first direct television broadcast between American women in Boston and Soviet women in Leningrad became possible. In response to one of the American women's innocent questions, Lyudmila suddenly recited: "We *(that is, in the USSR - author's note)* don't have sex!" This phrase became a catchphrase, and the whole world laughed at its absurdity, and what

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Most importantly, Ivanova's words were giggled by her studio neighbors in Leningrad, right there on air; their cries drowned out the heroine's final words: "We have love." It was a complete embarrassment. What prompted Ivanova to utter this ideological cliché remains unknown.

Her program was delegated by a Soviet women's organization, so she could easily have blurted out something stupid after listening to too many instructions. The situation with family ethics in Putin's Russia is reminiscent of that teleconference. On the one hand, the Kremlin demands that citizens follow certain "traditional family values" and maintain moral chastity, but on the other, all citizens understand perfectly well that these are just words and an attempt by the Kremlin to conceal its own immorality.

However, looking at the family policy of Pu-
It would be wrong to view the story only through the prism of statistics. It's difficult to see the drama of millions of specific people in numbers. And this drama deserves
lives the story.

Less than six months have passed since December 12, 2012, when President Putin declared the end of
the concept of “spiritual bonds”, part of which became

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Rejection of "non-traditional relationships" (that is, LGBTQ in the Russian government's newspeak). 23-year-old Vladislav Tornovoy, a resident of a disadvantaged area of Volgograd, was drinking on the street with three acquaintances. At one point, his drinking buddies threw Tornovoy to the ground and began beating him. Then they pulled down his pants and slashed his genitals and anus with the neck of a broken bottle. Then they forced a broken beer bottle into his anus, followed by another, and then a third. Tornovoy was still alive. His torturers attempted to set him on fire, but even after that, Vladislav was still breathing. Then, they dropped a 20-kilogram rock on his head several times. Tornovoy died. His killers were caught fairly quickly.

During interrogations they confessed that they had killed a significant someone after he revealed he was gay. The victim's family subsequently went to great lengths to publicly deny Vladislav's homosexuality. Perhaps he really wasn't gay, or perhaps the reason is that the very fact of homosexuality in Putin's Russia inevitably becomes stigmatized even for relatives and friends of LGBTQ people. Russian

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Law enforcement agencies don't keep separate statistics on crimes against homosexuals, although researchers once found185 that in 2012, when Putin proclaimed the ideology of "spiritual bonds," the number of attacks on LGBTQ people quadrupled compared to the previous year. It would be naive to think that the Kremlin was unaware of and didn't direct the antigay campaign across the country.

Summer 2013. One of the authors of this book meets with officials from the presidential administration, Timur Prokopenko and Pavel Zenkovich. The topic of conversation was supposed to be the corruption cases we had uncovered, but their interlocutors had a different agenda. Laughing heartily, the high-ranking Kremlin officials told us that publications about the "non-traditional sexual orientation" of the famous Russian journalist and writer Mikhail Zygar would soon appear online. And the next morning, anonymous authors indeed made an edit to the Russian Wikipedia article about Zygar. The essence of the edit was that the journalist was gay. A wave of publications about him followed.

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The information about the orientation spread across Kremlin-linked websites. The entire incident bore the hallmarks of a targeted campaign against Zygar and the independent television channel Dozhd, which he headed at the time. It became clear that the Kremlin had been aware of the campaign in advance and was conducting it from there.

In the same year 2013, the Russian parliament passed a law "prohibiting the promotion of non-traditional sexual relations among minors," which was later extended to adults. Similar laws were passed by many Russian regions. Under these provisions, people could be fined or even arrested for disseminating any information that the authorities might deem propaganda of homosexual relations. The laws opened a Pandora's box. Not only did many gay activists suffer from them, but the laws served as the starting point for a massive campaign to remove books, magazines, and comics from sale, and to censor films and television programs. Each region interpreted the signal sent from the Kremlin to the extent of its own cruelty and ignorance. In the Jewish Autonomous Region, authorities decided to check for the corresponding...

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In violation of the law, the official flag of the region, which depicted a rainbow (but eventually retained it, establishing that the rainbow symbol goes back to the Jewish menorah), and in Chechnya - and this is so far the most dramatic page of the anti-gay campaign - the authorities secretly executed several local gays, and subjected others to torture and humiliation. 187 The Russian authorities did not conduct any investigation into these incidents, which gave the green light to more and more attacks on the LGBTQ community. In recent years, the forced abduction of young men and women who, because of their homosexual orientation, wanted to leave Chechnya and neighboring regions for Moscow or abroad, has become a widespread practice. The fate of many gays abducted and taken home against their will is unpredictable.
news.

At the end of 2023, Russian authorities decided to go even further and designate the very phrase "LGBTQ" as "extremist." Now, anyone who publicly identifies with this group or uses associated symbols (such as the rainbow flag) faces a fine, followed by arrest and imprisonment. The first examples of such repression are already in sight.

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It cannot be said that by passing such inhumane laws, the authorities indulged the homophobia of the Russian voter. Polls have never revealed an unequivocally negative attitude towards LGBTQ people in Russia. For example, back in 2005, the majority of Russians – 51% – said that gays should enjoy the same rights as other citizens (35% disagreed). Fourteen years of state persecution of LGBTQ people have passed, and the number of supporters of equal rights for minorities has naturally fallen to 47%, while the number of those who deny this equality to homosexuals has grown to 43%.188 In the Russian pop scene, both before and after the adoption of the anti-gay laws, there were plenty of people who did not

fitting into Putin's notion of gender roles. And that didn't stop millions of Russians from worshiping these pop idols. What's more,

Ordinary Russians - it's enough to remember that the singer and dancer Boris Moiseyev, who has been extremely popular for the last 30 years, an openly bisexual and the author of the hit "Blue Moon," was accepted into the pro-Putin party "United Russia" in 2003. In other words, Putin's supporters were not embarrassed

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the fact that a gay singer would share his popularity with their party.

Homosexuality was never taboo in Russian politics—on the contrary, for many years voters readily cast ballots for candidates whose "non-traditional orientation" they could not help but suspect. And the Kremlin favored these politicians with the utmost favor.

It was the beginning of 2003. The world was in turmoil—everything was pointing to the US invading Iraq. Many Russian politicians were frequenting Baghdad: some on diplomatic missions, others to demonstrate their support for the dictator there, Saddam Hussein. A report on one of these trips was shown on Russian state television. An elderly and, apparently, rather drunk man, smoking a cigarette, hugging unknown young men and cursing profusely, addressed US President George W. Bush: “Fucking cowboy! Baghdad is your grave… George, your soldiers will be torn to pieces here.” In the end, the speaker addressed all US presidents: “Fucking blowjobbers, fucking masturbators, faggots,

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"Fuck!" The young men who were hugged by the speaker laughed drunkenly at every dirty joke.

The man with the cigarette is Vladimir Zhirinovsky. He is a veteran of Russian politics, the founder and longtime leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), so named due to a misunderstanding—Zhirinovsky was not drawn to either liberalism or democracy. The history of the LDPR itself could be the subject of a fascinating book that would reveal much about politics and ethics in Russia, but for now, it's important to understand three facts. First, Zhirinovsky, although many viewed him as a comical character, was one of the most recognizable and well-known politicians in the country. He remained a State Duma deputy for 30 years. Second, the LDPR is not a fringe organization, but a party that once, in 1993, won a parliamentary election. It was a sensation—after 75 years of communism, many expected the team of reformers backed by President Boris Yeltsin to win. But Russians had such a hard time with the first years of market reforms that they chose to vote for Zh.

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Zhirinovsky, who, like a true populist, wasn't shy about making unrealistic promises. In every subsequent election, the LDPR invariably won seats in the Duma. This wasn't hindered (or perhaps even helped) by the fact that the party's ranks were always full of charlatans and crooks of all stripes—from criminal bosses to the aforementioned hypnotist Anatoly Kashpirovsky. A third fact is that throughout almost his entire career, Zhirinovsky clearly enjoyed the Kremlin's favor—he was never punished, no matter what illegal atrocity he committed. Neither blatant corruption, nor assault, nor rape accusations (more on that below) ever served as grounds for the Russian authorities to reprimand Zhirinovsky. Moreover, the LDPR regularly receives considerable money from the budget (legislation guarantees state funding to those parties that have representation in the State Duma).

However, there is a fourth fact in Zhirinovsky's story that vividly illustrates the hypocrisy of the Russian elite. Zhirinovsky is a bisexual whose intimate preferences were well

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are known not only to his party colleagues, but to the entire political establishment of Russia. At least five deputies told the authors of this book about the LDPR leader's infatuation with young men189 . Although any ordinary Russian could have guessed this without any inside information. A video recording has been widely circulated showing the middle-aged party leader, wearing only swimming trunks, having fun in a pool with a group of young men190. But the innocent

Things weren't limited to sexual entertainment. In the late 1990s, Zhirinovsky held a young woman and a young man in his house, forcing them to perform intimate services for him.191 After some time, the captives escaped, but no investigation was conducted. Later, journalist Renat Davletgildeev would recount how, at the age of 20, he interviewed Zhirinovsky and how he "groped his ass," and then

The politician's aides tried to take the reporter to the "LDPR corporate bathhouse"192.

Zhirinovsky is a champion of hypocrisy, comparable to the main characters of this book.

He had a wife, although he himself publicly admitted that he was not close to her193. She gave birth to Zhirinovsky’s son, Igor Lebedev (he did not become

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(Taking his father's surname, Lebedev is his mother's.) Zhirinovsky made his son a State Duma deputy. The relationship between father and son was terrible—

At times, they literally fought and threw furniture at each other right in the parliament building. However, Zhirinovsky didn't just take his son into the Duma.

"All deputies of Zhirinovsky's faction

"They can be divided into three groups," a Kremlin official well acquainted with the LDPR leader once told us. And he was right. First, there are the protégés of the presidential administration, such as the aforementioned Litvinenko poisoner, Andrei Lugovoi. Second, there are those who bribed Zhirinovsky, literally paying for their own entry into parliament. This is how the most outspoken debauchee in Russian politics became a member of parliament—even greater than Zhirinovsky himself! We're talking about Leonid Slutsky, a tall, middle-aged man with a booming voice and primitive morals. The scandal erupted in 2018, when the Dozhd TV channel first reported several instances of Slutsky harassing female journalists working in the State Duma. Several of his victims confirmed this story.

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Moreover, a BBC correspondent even provided an audio recording194 in which the deputy can be heard groping her, trying to put his hand under her clothes. The State Duma reacted predictably—Slutsky's colleagues found nothing reprehensible in his behavior.195 The third group of LDPR deputies are Zhirinovsky's lovers. For example, in 2016,

a very young man became a State Duma deputy, whose political achievements no one knew about because they didn't exist. 21-year-old deputy Vasily Vlasov joined the party as a teenager (in his interviews, he said he was 13, 15, or 16) and soon became Zhirinovsky's assistant. Having barely been elected to parliament, young Vasily began receiving high positions, quickly rising to Zhirinovsky's first deputy. There is only one explanation for such an incredible career: Vlasov was his boss’s lover for some time, two State Duma deputies confidently told us196.

Both Zhirinovsky and his lover, and Slutsky, and other members of the LDPR regularly voted for all the repressive laws invented

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in fulfillment of Putin's concept of "spiritual bonds." However, the State Duma also had its share of morality regulators. One of them, Elena Mizulina, had long been a liberal—as long as it was permissible from the authorities' point of view, she belonged to the democratic parties SPS and Yabloko. When the liberals lost representation in the Duma, she joined the pro-government party A Just Russia and became one of the authors of the law "banning the propaganda of homosexuality." Over time, Mizulina became

into a symbol of the prohibitive norms adopted by the State Duma. So, when journalists joked that Mizulina had allegedly come up with an initiative to ban oral sex in Russia, many internet users believed them, and the deputy was forced to publicly deny this information.197 Another prominent homophobe in the Duma, Vitaly Milonov, took a similar path.

In the early 90s, he was a member of the Free Democratic Party together with the famous human rights activist Lev Ponomarev, and under Putin he became one of the main fighters for “spiritual bonds.”

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However, the main symbol of hypocrisy in the Russian parliament may be its speaker and Putin confidant, Vyacheslav Volodin. Every time the State Duma issues a homophobic statement, Russian social media erupts with jokes about Volodin, and here's why. The speaker hails from the Saratov region, where he rose to the position of vice governor. In the late 1990s, he moved to Moscow, where he began building a career as both a federal politician and a businessman, becoming a co-owner of oil and fat factories. Because of the latter fact, Volodin has acquired the nickname "Milkman," but this doesn't bother him much. Volodin is far more concerned about another notoriety that has surrounded his name since those early days. In the mid-2000s, two articles appeared in the Saratov press, titled "The Party's Harpoon" and "Gay, Bears." The first article described how, while vacationing on a luxury yacht with a group of friends, Volodin allegedly accidentally wounded a young woman with an underwater hunting rifle. The article, "The Party's Harpoon," can still be found online, although a Russian court, at Volodin's request, deemed the publication "slander" and punished

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its author. The second article is a different matter—all traces of it have vanished, and not a single reprint of it can be found online. A former United Russia official, without going into details, says that Volodin personally ensured that the text, by hook or by crook, disappeared from public access.198 What so upset Molochnik? The bears were referring to United Russia members—

This is the official symbol of the ruling party. But the article only mentioned one gay person—journalists claimed that Volodin was spending time in a Saratov bathhouse with young men, and that there was even a video recording of his escapades. We don't know whether this is true or not (the speaker's acquaintances unanimously insist it's a lie), but what's important is that Molochnik has been maniacally stubborn throughout his career in trying to prove he's not gay. In the spring of 2013, LGBTQ activist Nikolai Alekseev confidently announced Volodin's "non-traditional orientation" on the radio. At that time, according to his official biography, the official was unmarried and childless, which only fueled the rumors. Over the next couple of years, Volodin defended himself—for example, in a subcon-

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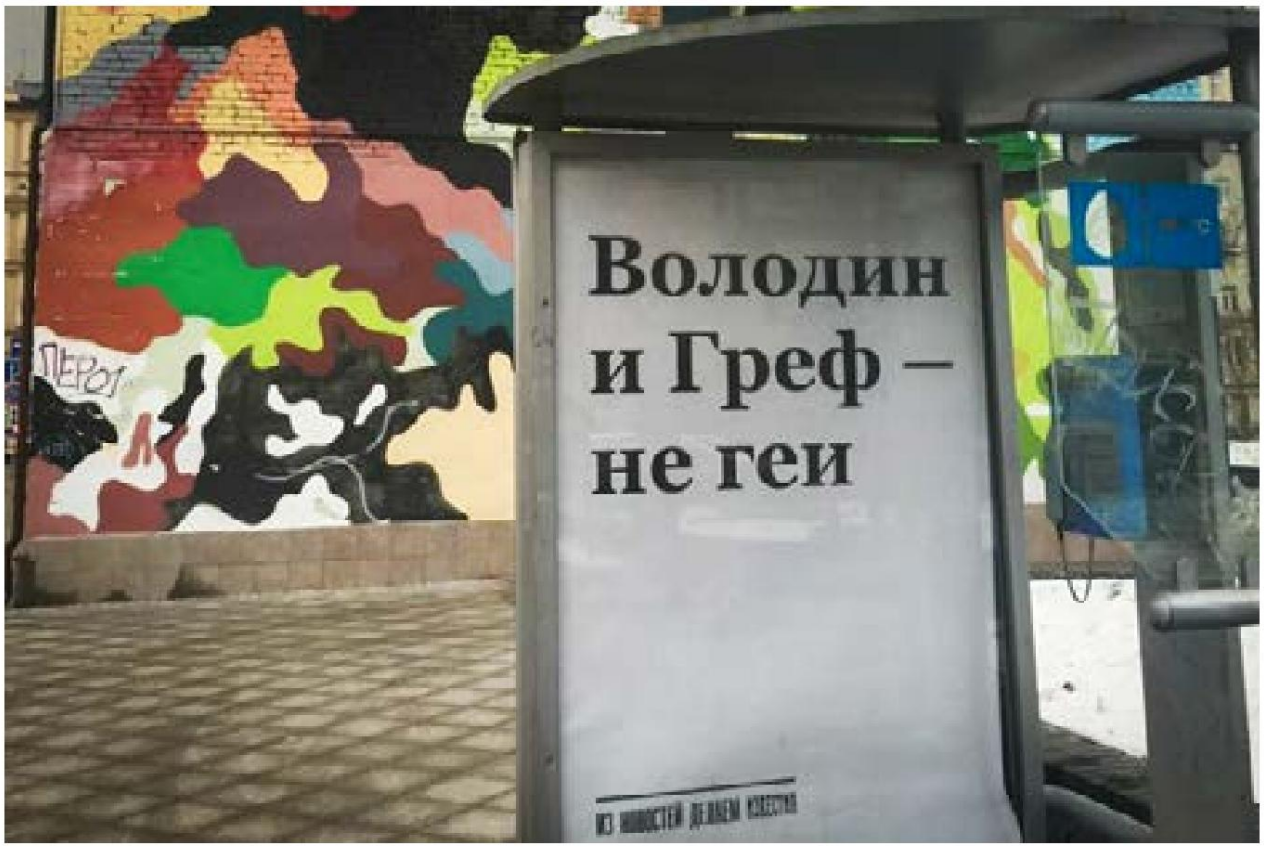
The government-controlled newspaper Izvestia published an article stating that the incriminating evidence about Volodin's homosexuality was "ordered by the US State Department."199 But LGBTQ activists200 continued to persist.



Posters like these, which parodied a commissioned article in Izvestia, appeared at bus stops in Moscow in 2015.

Volodin was clearly nervous. At the end of the summer of 2015 years, several journalists, including one of the authors of this book, were suddenly invited to

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meeting with him. To the journalists' surprise, they were invited not to the official's office, but to a luxurious mansion outside Moscow (Volodin claimed he had earned the money for this house during his business career). The deputy head of the Kremlin administration gave the journalists a tour of the property—and, introducing his dog to the journalists, casually mentioned that he also has a wife (her name is Yana Polyakina) and children with her. He then showed them off.

The fact that Volodin was afraid of innuendo about his sex life is not at all surprising. Believe it or not, Vladimir Putin is also to blame for this. When Putin, then head of the FSB, used a "honey trap" (as the intelligence services call a blackmail or discrediting operation involving a fake sexual partner) on his enemy, Prosecutor General Yuri Skuratov, in 1999, he set a kind of "gold standard" in this dirty craft. Under President Putin, this practice will be used repeatedly against his rivals, as well as against random people who have somehow displeased someone (any crime, if committed with impunity by the authorities, becomes

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(appears attractive even to mere mortals). In 2009-2010, the Kremlin launched a campaign to discredit opposition leaders and journalists - they, one after another, were secretly filmed during sex with a girl named Ekaterina Gerasimova, also known by the nickname "Katya Mu-Mu." As in 1999, pornographic scenes filmed with a hidden camera were shown openly on state television and on the website of the pro-Putin party "United Russia." According to journalists, Katya Mu-Mu was recruited by Russian intelligence services in order to meet opposition members and, under plausible pretexts, invite them "to her home" (as once with Skuratov, it could have been a safe house), where the equipment for filming was already installed. 201 Katya offered her guests

During sex, they wore the same, easily recognizable hat—apparently, this was intended to show that all the men had slept with the same girl in the same room. Showing this footage on state television, the presenters particularly emphasized the "immorality" of the opposition: they were deceiving their families,

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They are the antithesis of President Putin, who cares about "true, traditional values." It was obvious to everyone that the Kremlin was behind the provocation, as it later was with the leak of intimate information about Mikhail Zygar, and the only goal of the campaign was

to help Putin in the upcoming 2012 elections, which would see the Russian tsar face his first serious challenges. Not only young women but also men were sometimes used for provocation. In 2024, it became known that Russian spy Pavel Rubtsov, hiding under the guise of Spanish journalist Pablo González,

He entered into a romantic relationship with Zhanna, the daughter of prominent opposition figure Boris Nemtsov, who lived abroad. In this case, there was no defamation, but Gonzalez gained access to documents on the computer of Nemtsova, who by then had become a prominent figure in the Russian opposition. When Gonzalez was arrested in Europe, Russian authorities spent a long time seeking his extradition. The spy was eventually returned to his homeland as a result of an exchange of American detainees in Russia.

and Germans, and Putin solemnly greeted him at the airport.

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As we've already written, kompromat has long been the Russian tsar's favorite weapon. How long ago? In 1999, when he aired intimate scenes with the Prosecutor General on television? Or during his time in the KGB, where they always favored "honey traps" and blackmail? Or perhaps during his time in the St. Petersburg mayor's office? What would you say?

This question is answered by ourselves, we have one unique story that gives a comprehensive idea of the morality of the Russian authorities202.

Leningrad, 1980s-1990s. Officially, there was "no sex" in the USSR, but in reality, there was, and for every taste. Homosexuality was considered a criminal offense back then (according to the Soviet Criminal Code, "sodomy" could lead to a five-year prison sentence). Therefore, Leningrad gays met secretly, in designated locations around the city. The most famous such location was the Catherine Garden (popularly known as

Katya's Garden is right in the center. Kazan Cathedral is nearby, and crowded democratic demonstrations took place in the square in front of it. The same couple could be seen both in the park among gays and at the democratic rallies.

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people—Vladislav Terekhin and Vladimir Gushchin. If these two were in Katya's garden at the behest of their hearts, then at the rallies—by order.

The thing is, they played the same role as Katya Mu-Mu, planted sexual partners for the secret services. The standard mission went like this: they met young men at rallies or in "informal youth" circles (meaning those who were interested in Western music, dancing, and so on), and then invited them to a safe house right there on Zhelyabova Street (later Bolshaya Konyushennaya), right in the center of Leningrad. There, either with the help of

alcohol and sleeping pills mixed into it, or they would consent to have sexual intercourse with them. The incident was photographed, and the photos were later used by blackmailers to force the young men to cooperate with the police or assist Terekhin and Gushchin in their vile work. The first known incident of this kind took place back in the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, the Civil Resistance Movement (CRM) was active in Leningrad.

a group of Democrats supporting the aspiration

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The Baltic republics were forced to secede from the USSR. Two members of the DGS fell victim to Terekhin's "honey trap"—they were eventually forced to appear on Soviet television with words of repentance.

The facts of violence perpetrated by Terekhin and Gushchin (later a man named Sergei Barkan joined this group) became known to the public already in the 90s. Harassment by them

Several young men told the story. And Terekhin was initially detained for
Fraud, and then kidnapping and sexual assault of a teenager. However, simply saying "kidnapping and assault" isn't enough. The case was horrific. Using his connections, Terekhin became an assistant to Alexei Levashev, a member of the St. Petersburg parliament, in 1996. He also immediately became Levashev's lover—whether by orders from his superiors or out of his own desire is unknown. Levashev was a prominent figure back then. In 1989, he became the youngest member of the first Soviet parliament, the Congress of People's Deputies. He then returned to St. Petersburg and was elected to the local parliament, and also ran unsuccessfully for governor of the city.

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In short, Vladislav Terekhin gained the trust of a well-known politician. Then Terekhin and Levashev tricked two young men into the deputy's apartment. Only those present know exactly what happened in that apartment, but the fact is that one of the young guests would later commit suicide, while the other would testify to investigators that Terekhin and Levashev had demonstratively had sex and then harassed him.

Terekhin will be jailed. But he'll be released and continue his dirty work in the interests of the Russian authorities. His most recent high-profile incident was the same well-rehearsed provocation against one of Alexei Navalny's supporters in 2018. Pictured below is Terekhin, the provocateur and corrupter, with deputy Vitaly Milonov, a hypocrite and persecutor of LGBTQ people.

meet with young people.

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There were many such meetings. The thing is, Vladimir Gushchin was invited to work at the St. Petersburg mayor's office back in the 1990s; in other words, he became Vladimir Putin's colleague. What did such a person do at the mayor's office? Until very recently, he worked in the youth affairs committee's department! Terekhin and Barkan worked alongside this old "friend." The latter became famous in 2020 for stabbing a random passerby with an awl. He wasn't sent to prison; he was pardoned. So, let's repeat it again.

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Once again: rapist provocateurs have been organizing sexual traps for the opposition for 30 years, and not only are they not prosecuted by law, but they are also trusted to work with young people.

And also Barkan, according to the testimony of young oppositionists, He tortured political activists after detaining them at rallies. How did he torture them? With a bottle shoved up their anuses—another terrifying refrain from Russian history under Putin.

The pervasive hypocrisy of Putin's policies—especially regarding relations between the sexes—will be even more evident in the example of the Russian president himself and his inner circle, whom we will discuss in the next chapter. Here we will describe the fates of the heroes mentioned above. Lyudmila Ivanova lived a long life, had five husbands, and several extramarital affairs. In later interviews, she

said that her remark about the absence of sex in the USSR was simply misunderstood. Elena Mizulina served in the Russian parliament for 30 years and resigned in the fall of 2023, having done much to ruin the lives of millions.

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people. Vitaly Milonov took over the baton from her. He still works in the State Duma, sowing lies and hatred. Mizulina's daughter, Ekaterina, has followed in her footsteps—she heads the public organization "League for a Safe Internet." Essentially a censorship body, it was created by Konstantin Malofeev, the "Athos man" you've already met, a hypocritical moral crusader in Vladimir Putin's inner circle, just like most of the characters described in this book.

Vyacheslav Volodin remains a prominent politician, albeit without long-term prospects. In 2016, he fell out with Putin's "consigliere," Yuri Kovalchuk, and since then has held the high-ranking, but insignificant in Russian reality, post of Speaker of the State Duma. Volodin likely often recalls the fate of one of his predecessors, Boris Gryzlov, for whom, at some point, there simply wasn't a place in Putin's court. But Molochnik's family is doing well, at least financially—the same Yana Polyakina, whom the speaker showed to the press as proof of his masculinity, has suddenly acquired a business and luxurious real estate.

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Vladimir Zhirinovsky died of coronavirus. Ironically, at the end of his life, he proved that someone often called a clown deserved to be taken seriously. In December 2021, he stood before the State Duma for the last time and predicted war with Ukraine, missing the timing of the aggression by just two days. Zhirinovsky then said the war would begin on February 22, 2022—a prediction many at the time dismissed as just another farce. Putin invaded Ukraine on February 24. That day, Zhirinovsky was already dying in the hospital from extensive lung damage. The funeral of the most famous bisexual figure in Russian politics was attended not only by his parliamentary colleagues but also by the president himself. A year later, they would all support a legislative ban on LGBTQ rights in Russia.

As it happened in the Middle Ages, the favorites fell
They fall into disgrace as soon as the corpse of their patron cools. Zhirinovsky's young lover, Vasily Vlasov, was simply kicked out of the State Duma a few months after the death of the LDPR leader. He was kicked out, of course, not for his senselessness and immorality, but because his place was needed.

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new favorites. The party leader, of course, became Zhirinovsky's most depraved associate—
That same Leonid Slutsky, guilty of serial harassment. Zhirinovsky didn't leave the party to Igor Lebedev, his son from a woman he didn't love. Lebedev eventually quit politics, changed his name (he's now David Garcia), and settled in Dubai.

All this to further distance himself from his father's legacy. He did not attend his father's funeral.

Katya Mu-Mu also spends time abroad. She has radically changed her appearance and given birth to a child. As for the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Russians who find themselves unable to fit into Putin's "traditional family," fleeing abroad isn't a matter of luxury, but of survival. But not all of them can leave their homeland to love and be loved freely and safely.

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3. Someone like Putin

How Vladimir Putin, his subordinates, and friends plunged into promiscuity

The title of this chapter is a line from the most popular song about Putin. It was recorded back in 2002 by the little-known band "Singing Together." Initially, the song went unnoticed; its first surge of popularity in Russia came in 2003–2004, when Putin was running for reelection. The song resurfaced in 2007–2008, during the period of "uncertainty" we described above (the president's supporters wanted Putin to remain in office, contrary to constitutional requirements, and launched a campaign to popularize the leader, including through this song). Finally, its most recent (so far) surge came in 2015, immediately after the seizure of Crimea, when the Russian president had already become a full-fledged tsar.

Musically, the song is of no interest. Politically, it's a different matter entirely. Its author, Alexander Elin, said he wrote the lyrics on a bet: his friends couldn't believe that for 200

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For a few dollars, you could record a song that would "break the charts."205 Yelin won the argument thanks to the fact that in 2002, the population literally adored Putin. "It was euphoria. A new, young leader who was moving the country forward," Yelin explained.206 The song primarily appealed to a female audience (the same ones Putin appealed to with his ostentatious religiosity) —the backbone of Putin's electorate. The most important verse goes like this:

Someone like Putin, full of strength,
Someone like Putin shouldn't drink.
Someone like Putin, so that he doesn’t offend,
Someone like Putin, so he doesn't run away.

This is practically the epitome of a man—he's young and healthy, free of addictions, values his wife and is faithful to her. But most importantly, he's the epitome of a ruler: he practices the same virtues he proclaims. Whatever the song's authors may say, it was clearly conceived for political purposes. Producer Nikolai Gastello, who founded the group "Singing Together" and promoted the track, was working as a press attaché for the Supreme Court at the time.

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and was a PR man close to Vladislav Surkov, the deputy head of the presidential administration. For many years, Surkov was responsible for PR support of Putin's domestic policies: he largely constructed the image of a macho president, and he also oversaw the elections, ensuring that Putin stood above the competition. The very name of the group, "Singing Together," echoes the name of the youth movement "Walking Together," which the Kremlin created around the same time to popularize Putin among young people. The rest of the group's repertoire also speaks to its political goals: songs against abortion and beer drinking, in support of veterans and State Duma deputies. It feels as if "Singing Together" were setting Putin's campaign slogans from various years to music. However, calling it music is a stretch.

too bold.

There was a catch, however. When it came to the president's health and lack of addictions, the song seemed entirely objective—at least, in this regard, Putin looked better than Boris Yeltsin, who governed the country from a hospital ward. But

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In terms of family values, with each new performance this hit became further and further removed from the truth.

"[From the very beginning of his rule], it was clear that Putin was interested in women. I personally remember a couple of unambiguous situations when he showed a clearly masculine interest in random women," recalls a former high-ranking Kremlin official who worked under Putin.207 " Lyudmila was never around at all; being the president's wife, apparently, had no interest in her," he adds, implying that in his daily life, the president did not give the impression of being a family man. His detachment from his wife is not something that suddenly awakened in Putin upon coming to power. Even when he worked in the St. Petersburg mayor's office, journalists noted that he made all his work trips without his wife.208 An old acquaintance of Putin's is certain that his marriage to Lyudmila in the 1980s was forced: marriage allowed the Soviet employee to go on a business trip abroad (such an unspoken rule did exist). "If he hadn't wanted to go abroad, he would have stayed."

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“Married to Russia for life,” jokes our interlocutor209.

With each passing day, Lyudmila appeared less and less frequently at events—even those Putin was supposed to attend with his wife. People first began asking questions back in January 2004, when Putin unexpectedly attended a Christmas service at a church in Suzdal alone. Parishioners then asked Putin where his wife was. He replied that Lyudmila couldn't attend because she was celebrating her birthday the day before their trip to Suzdal. What was Putin trying to say? That the president's wife had overindulged and couldn't celebrate the Christian holiday? Or was she celebrating her birthday separately from her husband? No one noticed the oddity at the time, except perhaps those close to Putin who knew the president was then having a secret family with Svetlana Krivonogikh and their one-year-old daughter. From then on, the inconsistencies only multiplied. Since 2008, Lyudmila has almost completely ceased appearing in public. Officials then came up with an explanation, albeit a strange one: from 2008 to 2012, Putin served as prime minister and, according to protocol, he shouldn’t

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was appearing in public with his wife. This sounds strange, in part because Putin was only nominally prime minister—in reality, he was still running the country, for

Many foreign leaders came to Russia with their wives to meet him, but he greeted them as if they were a single leader.

The absence of a wife is especially suspicious.
It looks like this if you look at Putin's most famous photo shoot of his entire reign. In the summer of 2007—right at the peak of that very "uncertainty," when everyone was wondering whether Putin would leave the presidency—he went on vacation to the Republic of Tyva (aka Tuva), a picturesque region in Siberia, six hours' flight from Moscow. Putin brought with him a distinguished guest, Prince Albert II of Monaco, who was a member of the International Olympic Committee. Russia was then seeking the right to host the Olympic Games in Sochi and was using all permitted and prohibited methods in this fight: from invitations to vacation in Siberia to bribes. However, the corrupt side of the Sochi Olympics would become public knowledge much later (we'll talk about this later).

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And in the summer of 2007, ordinary people watched the events in Tuva for a different reason. In the midst of Putin and Albert's vacation, the Kremlin published an unprecedentedly revealing photo story about the president's life— The photos showed Putin, shirtless, fishing and, like a topless fashion catwalk hero, strolling along a mountain river in splendid isolation. Nearly every global media outlet reported on the Russian leader's good physical condition, but some wondered: what image was the Kremlin trying to project of the 54-year-old married ruler by portraying him as a macho loner?

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Putin fishing on the Yenisei River, 2007

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We don't know how often readers of this book have gone on vacation without their spouses, but for Putin, it has become a tradition. Putin's PR people subsequently repeated the 2007 photo shoot.

Several more times, and also came up with new, original ways to demonstrate the president's masculinity: Putin (topless again) fished in Tuva, dived (in a wetsuit and bathyscaphe) in Lake Baikal, the Black and Baltic Seas, paraglided (in a gondola) with Siberian cranes, and wandered (in snowshoes) through the taiga. In most cases, these were the president's vacations, the kind of downtime that ordinary people typically spend with loved ones. We'll reveal some interesting details about some of these adventures in the final section of the book, but for now, it's important to remember that Lyudmila Putina didn't participate in any of them.

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Putin was expecting the so-called "flight of hope" in 2012—a flight of hatchery-raised Siberian cranes was supposed to follow his paraglider. But the birds weren't eager to join the president. "Only the weak cranes didn't fly," Putin later joked, perhaps even justified himself.

Photos with erotic undertones. There were people in Putin's inner circle who loved this propaganda tool. October 2010 — a time *of renewed uncertainty,* when the country wondered whether Putin would return to the presidency to replace Dmitry Medvedev. Just before Putin's 58th birthday, a video was published online

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erotic calendar with congratulations to the
The calendar was presented to the Prime Minister on behalf of, as it was said, students of the journalism department at Moscow State University, the country's most renowned university. Inside were photographs of 12 young women in erotic lingerie with suggestive captions like, "How about a third time?" The youngest participant in the photo shoot was 17 years old at the time; she hadn't even enrolled in university. The calendar was printed in 50,000 copies, priced at 250 rubles each, and demand was good. It soon became clear that the journalism department had nothing to do with the calendar. It was published by a young Moscow university graduate, Vladimir Tabak, who called the idea his personal initiative. However, as with the eulogy for Putin in 2002, it soon became clear that the calendar wasn't a personal initiative at all. It was much, much more serious.

This story213, which will ever have
all the grounds for turning into a criminal investigation, we need to start with a name: Vasily Yakemenko. A short, athletic 39-year-old official with the rank of minister—in 2010, he headed the Federal Agency for

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youth. Yakemenko had been working toward this position since 2000, when he briefly became a clerk in the presidential administration. Before working in the Kremlin, Yakemenko was part of a criminal gang in his native Moscow region. The young man had certain talents—he possessed organizational skills, knew how to charm and subjugate people. When one of the authors of this book first met him about 15 years ago, it was like "a date with a boa constrictor." Yakemenko had a very convincing appearance and speech; one of his subordinates in Nashi calls this ability of the boss "cri-

"minimal hypnosis."

Thanks to these talents, the Kremlin in the early 2000s commissioned Yakemenko to create pro-Putin youth organizations that, if necessary, could confront the opposition in street riots. Yakemenko's first brainchild was "Walking Together," the very same ones that supposedly "had nothing to do" with the propaganda song "Someone Like Putin." Then, another organization, "Nashi," emerged from this one, even the name of which indicated greater aggressiveness.

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(after all, “ours” are opposed to “foreigners”, “not ours”). “Ours” justified this characterization in full

At the very least, they persecuted opposition members, staged shocking actions bordering on foul play, and, of course, spent huge amounts of money from the state budget (often in the form of “black cash” – unaccounted cash used to give bribes, pay kickbacks, and commit other financial crimes).

Former Nashi press secretary Kristina Potupchik receives cash in the office of the deputy head of the Kremlin's internal policy department Timur Prokopenko (2014)

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(year). She was given a sum equivalent to several hundred thousand dollars—the funds are used, among other things, to pay bloggers loyal to the Kremlin. The photograph appeared online after the hacker group "Anonymous International" hacked Prokopenko's email.

Critics often called Nashi “Hitler Youth”214 and “Red Guards”215, referring to their similarity to the most horrific of the famous ideological youth organizations of the past.

However, there was no real ideology involved. Like Putin, Yakemenko lacks firm political views. He's an unprincipled, vicious careerist, likely fixated on sex. It was Yakemenko who came up with this idea: members of Nashi would infiltrate opposition politicians' press conferences and, at the most crucial moment, launch rubber dildos attached to microcopters into the air, ultimately disrupting the events. *"Our* members are fucking the opposition," Yakemenko's subordinates would pun with relish. Nashi, funded by the Kremlin, held a summer camp for Putin's supporters on the picturesque Lake Seliger between Moscow and St. Petersburg. What was this memorable

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What did the camp do, other than brainwash the youth with Putin's speeches? Promiscuity, which, judging by the testimonies of participants, Yakemenko himself was involved in. He was well over 30 at the time, while the rank-and-file Nashi members were between 16 and 20. When important guests, politicians, or businessmen came to Seliger, Yakemenko would select beautiful young women to accompany them—

"You never know," says one of the former "Nashists." "Imagine this picture: thousands of boys and girls going through puberty, in love with their already adult leaders. Hormonally, the situation was very unstable."

"Novka," another Nashi activist recalls those days. And then Yakemenko came up with an erotic calendar for Putin.

Less than two days after the calendar was published, it was already lying on the prime minister's desk (the calendar appeared on the Internet on October 6, 2010, and Putin was shown it on October 8, the day after his birthday, his press secretary admitted217). "Vasya *(Vasily Yakemenko -*

author's note) knew about VV's passion for young people and made sure that the calendar ended up in Putin's hands.

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"Tina," says one of the former leaders of Nashi. (VV is one of Putin's many code names, invented by his subordinates. We will discuss other nicknames in subsequent parts of the book.) It was a carefully planned operation. Kristina Potupchik, Yakemenko's closest subordinate, was the first to report the calendar on social media. Then, Kremlin-linked media outlets began asking Putin's press secretary obsequious questions—

No, no, not about why girls under 20 are posing half-naked for the birthday boy; he was asked whether Putin appreciated the models' beauty. And the Kremlin admitted: Putin not only looked at the calendar, but also spoke favorably of the photo shoot. "We hope that this <…>

"will not lead to the expulsion of girls from the institute," Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov reported as saying.

In fact, along with the calendar, Putin also received the contact information of the girls photographed in it. He chose one: 17-year-old Alisa Kharcheva, a native of the Moscow region town of Korolev, where she had already participated.

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participate in small beauty contests. Four people familiar with the story say that soon Putin's aide called Kharcheva and invited her to the head of state's residence outside Moscow. After the first visit, the young beauty was taken to see the president approximately every two weeks for a year, says one of the sources: "For Putin and Alisa's meetings, we always prepared some project for her to present to Vladimir Vladimirovich. Alisa did it willingly; she felt grateful for being introduced to the president."219 "Whose gift Putin liked, so to speak, could receive funding *(from the budget - author's note),"* one of the leaders of Nashi told us with a bitter smile years later.220 The president, however, did not

did not support.

What happened in the Kremlin alcoves between a 58-year-old man and a 17-year-old girl, only they know, but it is important to mention four

the fact.

In 2011, a year after Kharcheva and Putin met, the girl was enrolled as a student

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MGIMO is probably the most prestigious Russian university, nurturing future diplomats. It's usually attended by the children of wealthy parents or talented, top-performing students. Alisa was neither, and the year before, she hadn't gotten into Moscow State University, a lesser university. "It's a reward from Putin," explains our source who knows Kharcheva.

Two years after the calendar shoot, Kharcheva—this time on her own social media—published a new, explicit, and erotic photo for the leader's birthday.

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The photo was titled "Pussy for Putin." It did indeed feature a black kitten alongside Kharcheva, but what was more striking was the revealing neckline of the subject's red dress.

Alisa Kharcheva's Live Journal

"It was created by the same people who created the calendar in 2010. But this time, something went wrong," explains one of the former leaders of Nashi222. Very soon, Kharcheva deleted the post and also hid all her old photos from public access. Neither she nor Putin's press service commented on the photo shoot.

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Another three years passed, and Alisa Kharcheva acquired an expensive apartment in a prestigious area of Moscow. As journalists later discovered, the apartment was given to her by a businessman named Grigory Baevsky. It was easy to determine that he was an associate of Putin's closest friend, Arkady Rotenberg. Baevsky had given apartments to a whole group of people close to Putin, including one of his daughters, leaving no doubt: Kharcheva was somehow dear to the president. A former partner of Rotenberg and Baevsky, who knew both well, said this about the apartment: "Grisha is such a stingy man that if it were his own girlfriend, he would never have given her the apartment. That's how we realized whose girlfriend it really was." Finally, the fourth fact you should know: the people who pulled off the erotic calendar operation in 2010, namely Vladimir Tabak and Kristina Potupchik, subsequently became the Kremlin's top social media propaganda operatives. They are the ones who ensured Putin's leisure time.

Now they teach Russian youth morality on TikTok and Telegram. In terms of career, the only exception was perhaps Vasily Yake-

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Menko. In 2012, he lost his government position as a result of a bureaucratic struggle.
Within Putin's inner circle, where, as you already know, mutual devouring has become the norm. Since then, Yakemenko has tried his hand at various businesses, but without much success.

It's important to understand that, alongside Alisa Kharcheva's story, another love affair was unfolding in the life of Putin, who was married at the time. Her name was Alina Kabaeva. She was the Russian, European, World, and Olympic champion in rhythmic gymnastics, the "queen of the chest balance," as she was sometimes called by the sport.

commentators praised the perfect execution of this gymnastics figure.225 We cannot say in what year

exactly Kabaeva became the queen of not only balance, but also of Russia. Most likely, she became close to Putin between 2007 and 2011. The first date is the moment when the 24-year-old gymnast, with no experience outside of sports, was unexpectedly elected as a State Duma deputy. The word "elected" for the Russian parliament during Putin's time

Tina is not entirely correct, since the legislation

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The executive branch is completely subordinate to the executive branch. State Duma deputies are appointed by those approved by the presidential administration. So, Kabaeva, like several other female deputies we'll discuss later, was sent to parliament by the Kremlin. This fact immediately sparked frivolous rumors—Kabaeva's colleagues in the ruling United Russia party were already gossiping about an affair between the celebrated gymnast and the president. The second date—2011—is the year Putin gave Kabaeva his first proven expensive gift. He presented her with a huge apartment on the Black Sea coast in Sochi, his favorite resort town. The Russian president spends considerable time in Sochi every year—in and around the city, he owns not only a state residence but also a private palace, registered to proxies, which will be discussed later. As with the apartment for Kharcheva, the apartment for Kabaeva was purchased by an associate of Arkady Rotenberg. His name is Maxim Egunov, remember him. The gift was truly royal—realtor ratings called Kabaeva's apartment "the most expensive in Russia."227 The huge square footage, personal

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A helipad on the roof, furniture with abundant gilding, a design by Russia's most famous fashion designer—in short, gifts like these aren't given for successful legislative work in parliament; it was clearly a present for the woman he loved. Add to this the fact that almost all of Putin's other friends, as well as

If state-owned companies also considered it their duty to gift Kabaeva and her family expensive real estate across the country, then the special status of the "queen of balance" in Russia will become undeniable. We estimate all the gifts given to Kabaeva by Putin's friends and subordinates to be at least $120 million. The young woman's entire career in rhythmic gymnastics, not the most commercial sport, could not have legally earned even a fraction of this amount. After 2012, when Putin returned to the presidency, numerous indications pointed to his connection with Kabaeva. The gymnast, who until recently had no

having not only political but also business experience, was hired as a top manager of the National Media Group (NMG), a company controlled by one of the closest

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Putin's friends, Yuri Kovalchuk. Kabaeva doesn't have to bother with work, NMG employees told the authors of this book—she occasionally shows up at the office to give interviews on gymnastics. Media attempts to uncover Kabaeva's secret were harshly suppressed by the state. In 2008, the tabloid "Moskovsky Opisan " (Moscow Correspondent) reported rumors circulating in Moscow about a love affair between Putin and Kabaeva and was shut down within 24 hours. Agents from the responsible for the Federal Protective Service (the agency president's security) questioned the newspaper's editor in an attempt to determine the author's source of information.

Judging by the facts we've been able to gather over the years of investigation, Putin and Kabaeva's relationship was more than just adultery. The couple has
Children - according to our sources, two boys, Ivan and Vladimir. The entire family spends a significant amount of time at Putin's Valdai residence - another of those places in northwestern Russia, between St. Petersburg and Moscow, that the current Russian tsar loves so much. A mansion was built there for Kabaeva, her heirs, and staff.

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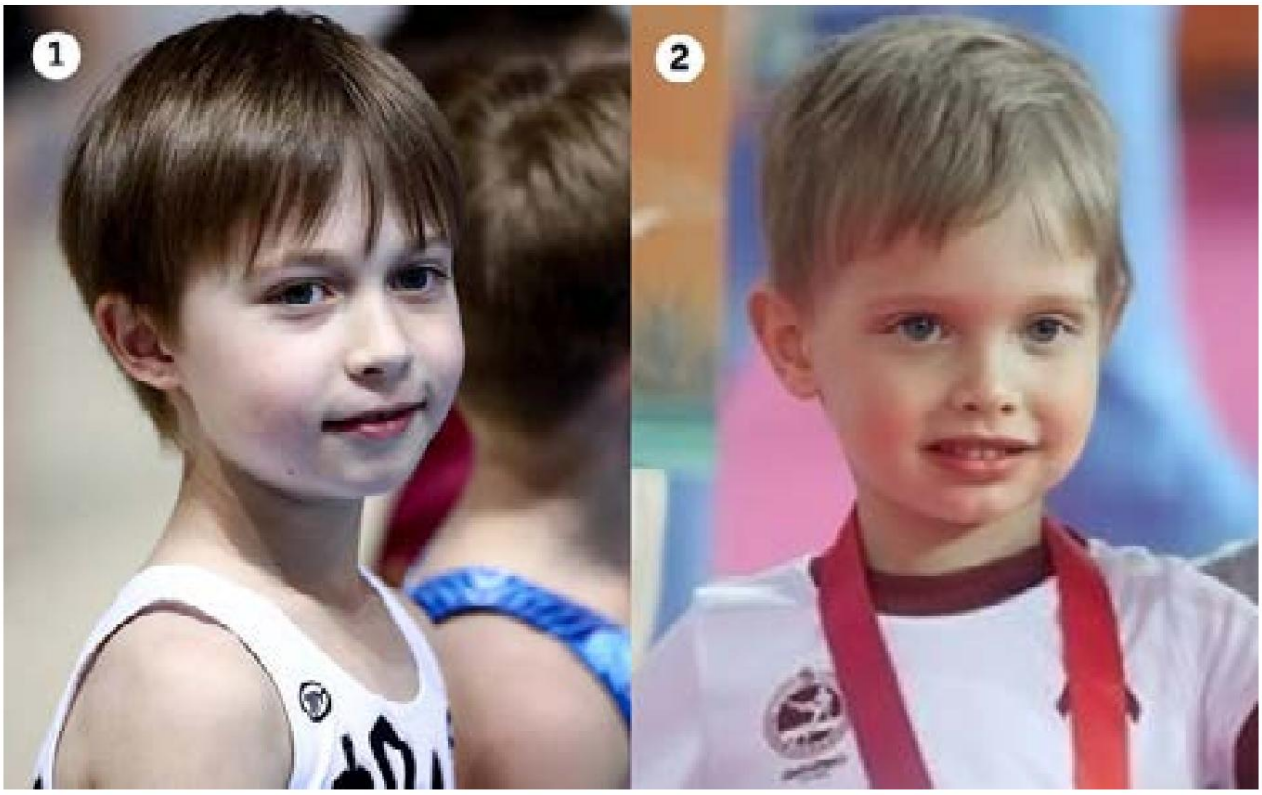
A separate wooden palace, a spa center, a children's recreation area, and a large park. Information about the gymnast and her children has been erased from government databases, the boys have been given the cover name Spiridonov, and the entire area around the royal family's Valdai residence is strictly guarded. However, Ivan and Vladimir did occasionally appear in public, which is why we have photographs of them, which we publish for the first time in this book.



Putin's sons: 1. Ivan Spiridonov; 2. Vladimir Spiridonov

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However, one must be extremely careful with the word "family" in Putin's Russia. Putin and Kabaeva, while a couple, are not truly a family. Neither before nor after his divorce from Lyudmila did Putin appear in public with young Alina. The president never officially remarried (although we cannot say for sure that they did not marry in church), and the Kremlin strictly prohibited questions about his life partner. In the next chapter, we will attempt to answer the question of why Putin chose an open relationship, but for now, let's add one important detail to the story of his love with Kabaeva.

Around 2011, when Putin, through his associates, blessed the Olympic champion with the most expensive apartment in the country, he did almost the same for three other famous gymnasts, Alina Kabaeva's colleagues on the Russian national team. The apartments were simpler than Kabaeva's, but still cost a considerable amount by Russian standards: all were located in a prestigious southwestern district of Moscow. The same Arkady Rotenberg associate, Maxim Yegunov, was responsible for finding and securing these apartments. It's important to know that the entire

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this property - both the one intended for Kabaeva and the one that was bought for her friends -
Putin personally paid for it. A shell company, Ermira, was involved in all the transactions, and his personal money, obtained through corrupt activities, was deposited into its accounts (we'll explain how this scheme was structured later). In other words, Putin himself, as a ruler, as a man, for some reason wanted to please a whole group of young women. Perhaps it was a generous gift for his lady's friends, or perhaps

maybe something less sublime.

One way or another, all this combined led to persistent rumors circulating among the Russian elite—and more broadly, in Russian society—that the president sleeps with numerous women, mostly significantly younger than himself. Deputies, ministers, and other insiders we've spoken to over the years of journalistic work have repeatedly, in low voices, told us about Putin's ever-increasing sexual relationships—sometimes with a model, sometimes with an athlete, sometimes with a ballerina, sometimes with a journalist. All of these interlocutors admitted...

foxes: they themselves have never seen the president

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with these women. In most cases, it is impossible to verify these rumors—at least while Putin rules Russia. But that's not even the important thing. Putin, who verbally defends the ideals of a strong "traditional family," has in fact instilled in society a completely different notion: marriage is a completely optional institution in which infidelity and polygamy are the norm, and every woman is dependent on a man, her success in career and well-being is merely the whim of the one who supports her. This is the true destructive result of Putin's policy on mo-

ral and morality.

In Russian, there's a derogatory term, "kazanka," meaning a woman supported by a wealthy and influential man. Like any slang term, it arose as a reaction to a widespread social phenomenon. We believe that Putin, whose example was readily followed by his retainers, is largely responsible for this phenomenon. Taking mistresses, resorting to the services of a sex escort, or engaging in intimate affairs with subordinates has become common practice among people in Putin's circle. Defense Minister

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Sergei Shoigu, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Chief of the Government Staff Sergei Prikhodko, Commander of the Russian National Guard and Putin's personal bodyguard Viktor Zolotov, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, Putin's chief of staff Igor Sechin, president of one of the largest state banks Andrei Kostin, Finance Minister Anton Siluanov, and Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov—this is an extremely incomplete list of Putin's courtiers who have been proven not only guilty of adultery but also of spending corrupt money on their mistresses and concubines, and in most cases, even arranging their careers. All these people have escaped not only punishment but even public condemnation. This is normal, it's widespread, as if society were responding—and, in its own way, it had a right. The system in which a woman's path to wealth and success lies "through bed" was fully formed under Putin.

In the green area of Moscow, which is called Fili, there has been an ice arena for a long time, belonging to the Ministry of Emergencies

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Tea situations. It so happened that about a decade and a half ago, participants of the so-called "Night Hockey League" began training there almost weekly. This is an amateur tournament, launched by Putin and his friends' passion for hockey. Now dozens of teams play in the "Night Hockey League" across Russia, but initially it was a close circle of the country's most influential men who gathered on the ice after hours to relax from work and privately discuss sensitive issues. There, they also had a sauna and shared meals after training. In short, it was a closed men's club with a very high membership fee. But this club also had one distinctly Russian difference from the norm. Women were allowed in. As a former Night Hockey League player recounts, attractive girls were often allowed into the Fili gym when VIP players gathered there so they could meet the hosts of Russia and brighten up their leisure time.230 " All the escorts in Moscow wanted to get in there," says another participant in those hockey matches.231

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One of the notable players of the "night league" is Putin's friend, Arkady Rotenberg, is no exception. This Leningrad gangster tried to match his high-ranking friend in terms of secret passions. Rotenberg had at least three official marriages and numerous outside affairs, some of which produced children who are now settled in Russia and Europe. "He lives by the principle: the more women and children, the better. They all caught this from Putin. Their ultimate idea," says a former friend and partner of Rotenberg's.232 Another of his partners (who declined to be interviewed for this book) opened one of the first swing clubs in Moscow in the 2000s. It was called "Karavella" and, coincidentally, was also located in Fili, not far from the ice rink for VIP encounters. One of the patrons recalls that the swing club was only there for the owner to find attractive partners. However, the best indication of the morals in this circle is that the businessman visited his intimate club with his own adult son233.

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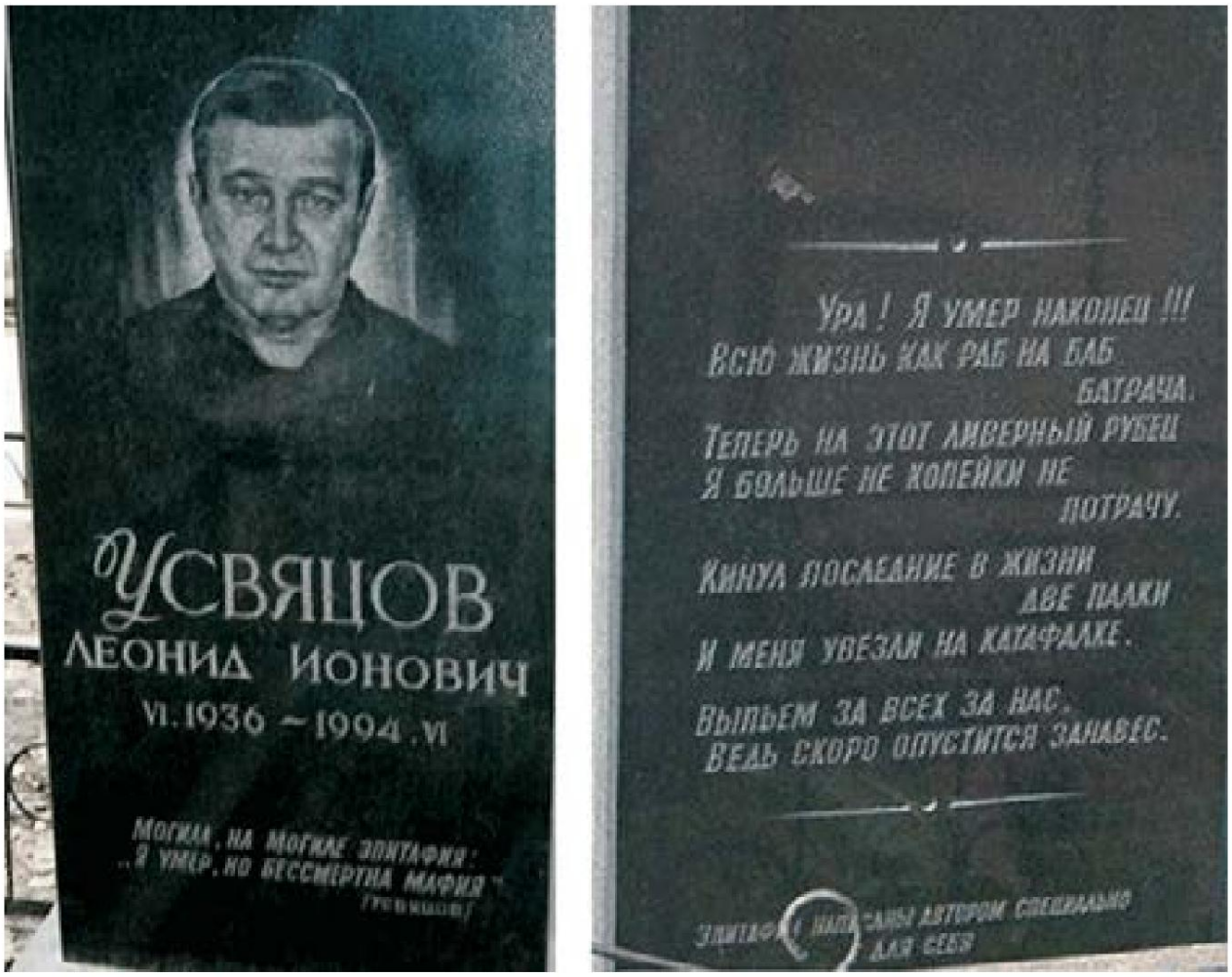

The photo shows the very same tombstone on the grave of Leonid Usvyatsov, a repeat offender and part-time judo coach for Vladimir Putin and Arkady Rotenberg. We reported that Rotenberg, a close friend and student of Usvyatsov, installed the tombstone, also inscribing an epitaph about the immortal mafia on the stone. However, the tombstone also had a flip side, on which Arkady Rotenberg engraved a poem by his mentor. Usvyatsov's poem is primitive in literary terms, but extremely rich in historical context. Using crude slang, the author informs the world that he spent too much money on sex with women throughout his life, and that his last two sexual encounters occurred immediately before his death. This is historical evidence.

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The morals of Putin's inner circle are literally etched in granite. As is the eternal testimony to the erudition of this circle—the 42-word epitaph contains two punctuation errors and one spelling error.

uglich_jj

If the president's partner became a State Duma deputy, why can't other officials build careers for their wives and family members? In 2007, Putin appointed Anatoly Serdyukov Minister of Defense—the first civilian to lead the ineffective Russian military and set about reforming it. This man could have gone down in history as a prominent reformer, but things turned out differently: Serdyukov fell in love with his advisor, Yevgenia Vasilyeva, and thanks to this, became famous as the hero of jokes. Serdyukov's partner rose rapidly—first to head the property relations department, which handled real estate transactions for the military department, and then the ministry's staff. Thanks to this affair, Russians learned what officials' mistresses could expect. When the intrigue led to Serdyukov's dismissal, investigators raided the premises.

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to Vasilyeva - and it turned out that she lived in a 13-room apartment, in which the authorities discovered 51 thousand precious stones, 19 kilograms of gold and platinum, as well as the entire Minister of Defense in a robe and slippers234.

This is the most scandalous story, but far from the only one. The Russian parliament, whose unscrupulousness has been exposed many times in this book, was, until a certain point, almost an entirely male-dominated place. In the first State Duma under President Putin (elected in late 1999), there were only 35 women out of 450 seats. That's 8%. The State Duma elected in 2021 already has 78 women, more than twice as many as 25 years ago. It would seem that parliament is on the path to gender equality, if not relative diversity. But there's a nuance. Of course, many female deputies received their powers in exchange for political favors to the Kremlin—for example, we've already reported on the "achievements" of Elena Mizulina. There were other deputies like her. But there was always another category—someone else's women, whom journalists who worked in the State Duma found unforgivable.

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It was extremely sexist, but each time they were called *"the woman of this or that"* (in the LDPR, as you remember, there were also *"the guys of that or that").* Of course, the main "woman" in parliament (of whom it is known) was Alina Kabaeva, who was awarded her deputy's credentials in 2007. In the same State Duma composition as Kabaeva, there were several other young and attractive women without any political experience: five, not counting Alina, athletes (two of whom also represented gymnastics, albeit different disciplines), one ballerina, one weaver, one aspiring businesswoman, one history teacher, three journalists, and one former nurse— among her achievements

At that time, all that was known was that she had studied at the institute with Putin's niece. The occupations of several other women were a mystery to almost everyone, including their own parties. One got into the State Duma because she was the wife of the Minister of Regional Development, another was the wife of a major tobacco lobbyist. Two women, Natalia Ermakova and Marina Ignatova, as it later turned out, could be called desperate adventurers (already in

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During their time in parliament, they began to be accused of
(They were involved in all sorts of scams—from embezzlement to diploma forgery), but, as they said at the time, they got into the Duma not only thanks to their thirst for adventure, but because they enjoyed the patronage of influential male members of United Russia. Three girls, including very young ones, became deputies solely because they were members of the pro-Kremlin organization Young Guard, and one—

Because she worked in the regional office of the ruling party. The reporters who worked with almost every one of the aforementioned women either knew the truth or had a fairly confident guess. The phrases "Shoigu's woman" and "Sobyanin's woman," applied to some of the deputies, stuck with them for a long time. Perhaps the journalists weren't ethically impeccable, but the truth was still on their side, since most of this motley crew had truly not distinguished themselves in politics. It was clear that they had gotten into the State Duma not on merit, but thanks to someone's (political or personal) patronage.

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One regional politician recalls an episode235 that exhaustively describes this phenomenon. Before the 2007 elections in Saratov, a local list of candidates for deputies from United Russia was being compiled. The list was almost ready when an urgent order arrived from Moscow: a new person had to be included, and immediately in second place. This was the world-renowned ballerina Svetlana Zakharova, who began her distinguished career at the Mariinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, Putin's birthplace. Zakharova was associated with many achievements in Russian ballet, but had absolutely no connection to politics, United Russia, or the Saratov region. However, the order was so strict that no one dared disobey. Local politicians immediately put together the facts they knew and came up with a theory that remains popular in the Russian establishment: Putin himself was promoting the ballerina for personal reasons. We cannot say whether this assumption is correct, and yet

It seemed so natural to United Russia that Zakharova not only easily received a mandate as a State Duma deputy, but also subsequently became involved in

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small and other posts in the Russian political hierarchy. Eventually, she fell under international sanctions for her involvement in the aggression against Ukraine, where she was once born and educated.

I was dancing.

There are plenty of young, attractive, and inexperienced female deputies in the Russian parliament even now. Some on the outside might rejoice: wow, there are so many young women of diverse backgrounds and origins in parliament! However, this *diversity*
on the contrary, another perverted value -
one of many analyzed in our book.

The fate of the heroes of this rich chapter also says a lot about the values of the Putin era.

Alina Kabaeva, apparently, remains (or remained until very recently) the life partner of the elderly Russian dictator. Their shared leisure time, their joy for their children, their opportunity to be together in public

and not to hide your feelings - all this will never come true, Putin ordered all this to be hidden for the sake of his own political goals and the false image of a champion of "traditional values."

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One can only sympathize with Kabaeva's fate, no matter how much wealth the Russian president has bestowed upon her: her heartaches will only become known to the world through yet another journalistic investigation, of which there will be many more. And even her wealth, the Russian Tsar's companion, cannot publicly own—most of it is registered to Kabaeva's 90-year-old grandmother, who lives in a remote village near Vladimir. The only public role Kabaeva is permitted is as the face of Russia's main rhythmic gymnastics tournament for children: she gives a start in life to young girls, future Russian beauties. For young gymnasts, Kabaeva is an idol, a role model. One would like to believe that this is only in the athletic sense.

Yakemenko married his subordinate from the youth organization. The Nashi movement he had conceived died ingloriously, as all ideological golems invented in the Kremlin sooner or later do. In 2012, when anti-Putin rallies roared through the streets of Russian cities, Nashi was unable to counter them, bringing only a small group of its supporters.

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The militants were sent to one of the squares. In other words, Nashi failed to achieve the main goal for which it was created. Counting on budget funding, as had been the case during the secret meetings between Putin and Kharcheva, was no longer worth it. After this, the organization was disbanded, and even officials began calling the remaining activists by the offensive nickname "Nashists"—a nickname reminiscent of fascists.

The girls who posed for Putin in 2010

They disappeared, never became famous models, and are reluctant to recall the experience. Alisa Kharcheva, the attractive young woman who received a call from Putin, is no exception. She married and gave birth to a daughter in February 2022, on the eve of her former patron's bloody invasion of the neighboring country. Alisa leads a low-profile life, running an elite tanning studio in the heart of Moscow. For girls in a northern country with a dearth of sunlight and gender equality, an attractive tan remains a powerful asset for success. Alisa's father, 50-year-old Vsevolod Kharchev, has played professional hockey, both with a bandy and with a puck, all his life.

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When his 17-year-old daughter was sent on a secret rendezvous with the 58-year-old Russian tsar in 2010, Vsevolod was not yet 40, and much younger than Putin, with whom he likely shared little in common other than a love of hockey. Every father wishes his daughters happiness, but how exactly Vsevolod understood Alisa's happiness will become clear years later. As the authors of this book know, in recent years, Vsevolod Kharchev has been receiving a monthly salary of approximately $1,000 from the state-owned company Dialog.237 This organization takes money from the Russian budget and conducts propaganda on social media, and is headed by the same Vladimir Tabak, the man who released the erotic calendar featuring a young Alisa. We have found no information about what the retired hockey player does at Dialog—most likely, he does nothing but collect money. In other words, the man who became the matchmaker for the king and the young maiden pays her father a thousand dollars a month for who knows what, perhaps for silence. If you have the ver-

There is a word that describes this situation, but you don’t dare to say it, don’t hold back.

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These are the Middle Ages, a time of tsars, vassals, and concubines, a time of *jus primae noctis.* Alexander Elin, the

man who in 2002 composed a hymn to Putin's masculine qualities, would eventually regret it. It was Elin, ten years later, in the wake of the anti-Putin protests of 2011–2012, who would compose (no longer on a dare) the biggest hit of the street protests —a song by the band Rabfak:

Everything is so complicated, everything is so confusing,
But there is no time to figure it out, brother!
Our madhouse votes for Putin,
Our madhouse will be glad to see Putin!

As we know, rallies will not overthrow Putin, but will lead to the concept of "spiritual bonds," a triumph of obscurantism that will destroy the lives of thousands or millions of Russians. In 2017, when Putin will no longer be a tsar without any limited powers, Russia will sing a new anthem to the leader. A video for the song "Uncle Vova, We Are With You!" will appear on YouTube, performed by the attractive young State Duma deputy Anna Kuvychko and a children's choir in military uniform. 238 In an artistic sense, the song is even less valuable than the hit "Such as Putin," but

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From a historical perspective, this is a notable symbol of the times. What was the deputy singing about, flaunting her prominent bust? About how Putin has made all of Russia's enemies tremble, and for this, all Russians—men, women, and children—admire him. This is a different image of Putin: he is not simply the ideal man, as in the 2002 song—he is now an experienced head of a family, a clan leader, wise and powerful.

Needless to say, how did Deputy Anna Kuvychko, who began her career as a secretary in United Russia, end up in the State Duma? She became first the mistress and then the wife of the mayor of her hometown of Volgograd, a local businessman and sponsor of the ruling party, Roland Kherianov. Anna's other political achievements are unknown. After her term in the State Duma expired, Kuvychko returned to Volgograd, where she has now become deputy mayor. It's probably already expected that

She oversees family and child-rearing issues239.

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4. The Tinder Swindler

How did Russian officials realize that the family—

this is not the most important thing

In 1977, a girl named Irina Starygina was born in the small village of Orshanka. On a map, Orshanka is the very center of European Russia, a picturesque place near Yoshkar-Ola, the capital of the Mari El Republic. In reality, it is a depressed Russian province, where the main industry is logging the centuries-old Volga forests. The girl grew up without a father, in a poor family of four women—Ira and her sister, their mother, and grandmother. Irina's childhood coincided with the Brezhnev era of stagnation, her youth with perestroika, and her young adulthood in the turbulent 1990s. Improving her financial situation was unlikely for an ordinary resident of Orshanka at that time. But the girl grew up beautiful. In the 1990s, she graduated from a teacher training college in her native village.

Most likely, after receiving her diploma, Ira would have become a teacher at the local school. But then big politics came to Orshanka. Young (though 14 years older than Irina) politician Leonid Mark-

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Leonid Markelov, a candidate for president of Mari El, came to the village for a campaign rally. At a meeting with students, Markelov noticed a tall brunette. A relationship soon developed between them, and by 1999, Irina and Leonid were married and had their first child. In 2000, Markelov became president of Mari El, a post he held for nearly 17 years. Mari El is certainly not the largest or wealthiest region in Russia, but Markelov was a prominent politician, one might even say a prominent member of the Putin-era political elite.

Like Putin, Markelov had no views worth discussing. He was an ordinary corrupt official, who, for a time, skillfully maneuvered between various influence groups in the Kremlin. Markelov's only goal was to maintain power and his secret income. Otherwise, he

and would have remained one of hundreds of unremarkable Putin officers, if not for his eccentricity and... Irina Starygina, married name Markelova.

Markelov ruled his region like a populist dictator, somewhat modeled on the Russian president. He could publicly threaten residents that

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destroy the road to their village because he was not greeted warmly enough.241 He wrote poetry, which was required to be taught in Mari schools, and began almost every meeting of the local government with reciting his own verses. He was especially fond of the poem "Let me be remembered as a wise king."242 He also had a great love for architecture and sculpture. In the center of Yoshkar-Ola, not the most beautiful city on the marshy

On the banks of the Malaya Kokshaga River, a new development area emerged—replicas of the medieval guild houses in Bruges, Belgium, the Venetian Doge's Palace, and the Moscow Kremlin were erected there. It looked blatantly tasteless, but the main problem was something else—many of the buildings were being built at the expense of the state budget. From 2000 to 2015, Mari El's debt to the federal budget grew from 0.5 to 10 billion rubles. 243 In the same central district of Yoshkar-Ola, Markelov—again at the expense of the state—

built a stone embankment lined with various statues, which he himself was presumably the co-author of. Who is on this embankment?

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there's just no one: from the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin to the Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn, who has nothing to do with Mari El (Pushkin, by the way, also had nothing to do with the republic). Markelov especially loved to erect monuments to people whose names began with the letters L and M, for example, Lorenzo de' Medici or Ludovico Moro (needless to say, these heroes of the past also have nothing to do with

what does it have to do with Yoshkar-Ola). On the fences there are These monuments were marked with the monogram "LM," which could also be interpreted as "Leonid Markelov." To make the allusion even more tangible, at some point a monument to none other than "Saint Leonid" was erected on the embankment. It's unlikely that the average practicing Christian knows the name of such a saint. The little-known monk named Leonid, who lived in the 17th century in the Vyatka region neighboring Mari El, was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church only in 2016—apparently with one goal: to please the head of Mari El. There, on the embankment, Markelov built the most luxurious complex of buildings in the republic.

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where he settled. Above the entrance to the governor's residence hung a family coat of arms specially designed for him, depicting a fearsome crowned lion bearing a flag with Mari ornamentation. The same coat of arms depicts a hand holding both a hammer and a sword—not by the hilt, but directly by the blade. It's likely that no one else, anywhere, had such a heraldic symbol.

In short, Markelov was a morbidly narcissistic freak, whom the Kremlin granted absolute power over almost 700,000 residents of Mari El. He could have gone down in history as

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a satirical character, but in reality everything was
not so funny.

During Markelov's tenure in Mari El, several journalists attempting to cover the governor's abuses were killed, imprisoned, or fired. Markelov liked to stroll during his lunch break through the center of Yoshkar-Ola, between his home and office. Several times during these walks, local activist Yevgeny Pirogov approached the governor with questions about his abuses. Pirogov was eventually forcibly committed to a psychiatric clinic and later to prison (he died in 2021, three years after his release). The Mari people—the indigenous people of the region—

were deprived of representation in government bodies. Corruption became omnipresent, and at the top of the corruption pyramid stood the governor himself and his nominees (since government officials cannot officially own businesses by law). Chief among Markelov's nominees was his wife, Irina. By 2012, this young woman, who grew up in poverty, was listed as the owner of seven large enterprises—from a cement factory to a

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Irina also owned a lot of the expensive real estate in which the Markelovs lived.

Why are we telling this story in the past tense? Because Leonid Markelov's bizarre world of coats of arms, monuments, and unbridled tyranny has already collapsed, and the beginning of this collapse was laid by Irina, the governor's until then devoted wife and figurehead.

On November 4, 2010, the Markelovs ceremoniously unveiled another monument on their private embankment—again, to less-than-famous Russian saints: Peter and Fevronia. These saints are revered in Russia as "patrons of family, love, and fidelity." According to legend,

It is, however, as often happens in hagiography, disputed by historians - the minor Russian prince Peter married the commoner Fevronia, who cured him of scabs. So Peter and Fevronia would have remained little-known heroes of church legends, if the Kremlin had not begun to drift towards "traditional values." In 2008, a new state holiday was established - Day of Family, Love, and Fidelity, or

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A simple celebration of Peter and Fevronia Day. Across the country, officials—often, of course, at state expense—erected monuments to the ancient saints. A separate state program with a sizeable budget was even established for the construction of monuments. Currently, there are at least 89 monuments to Peter and Fevronia in Russia — even more than the number of regions within the Russian Federation (though fewer than the number of monuments to Vladimir Lenin in the Soviet Union).

Of course, the tilt toward traditional values, as you've already seen from previous chapters, was nothing more than a propaganda ploy. For both Putin and thousands of his nobles, traditional values are nothing more than a smokescreen for corruption and immorality. Markelov's case demonstrates this perfectly.

clearly.

Less than two years after the happy Markelov family posed in front of the monument to Peter and Fevronia, Irina mysteriously disappeared. Her daughter and son remained with their father, and the governor's press service remained silent about their mother's whereabouts.

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It soon became clear that Markelova was in London, where she had secretly gone to visit her pen pal Shimon Hayut. At the time, this man's name meant nothing to anyone—especially since Shimon, an Israeli citizen, had been

I've used several fictitious ones for years

personalities. He became famous much later, when Netflix released the documentary The Tinder Swindler in 2022. Hayut was an extremely successful scammer, extorting money from women he met online. He began his fraudulent career in Europe shortly after Irina unveiled a monument to the patron saints of family fidelity in Yoshkar-Ola.

It's not hard to guess that Markelova and Khayut's happy romance didn't work out. But the situation was even more serious—Governor Markelov's secret wealth, carelessly registered in the name of his unfaithful wife, was at risk. According to an acquaintance of the couple, Irina managed to sell one of her apartments and gave the proceeds to Khayut, and then her lover disappeared. Irina wandered for a time.

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She traveled around Europe, but eventually returned to Yoshkar-Ola. There, she worked as a permanent makeup artist in a salon that once belonged to the governor's family. *Sic transit gloria mundi.* This catchphrase also applies perfectly to Governor Markelov himself. His wife's escape was only the beginning of the eccentric tyrant's problems. By 2017, Markelov had lost the Kremlin's trust—but not because of corruption or human rights violations. Putin's nobles simply began purging the team of former President Dmitry Medvedev, which included Markelov—some were simply fired, others were imprisoned. Such are the harsh laws of court life.

Markelov received 13 years for bribery and possession of ammunition, most of his companies, before
The properties registered to his wife and other family members were confiscated and given to the state. And all Russian officials, including Vladimir Putin himself, were given a very clear example: a wife is not the most reliable partner in secret affairs.

Of course, we don’t know for sure whether the story of Markelov and Starygina influenced the attitude

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Putin and his other vassals to their own wives. It's quite possible that the Kremlin was unaware of this soap opera. But the fact remains: from the time the Mari leader's wife ran away from her husband with money in her pocket, Putin's elite began a massive divorce campaign.

to have sex with their wives.

2011 – Putin's longtime aide, Igor Sechin, leaves his wife Marina. It was Marina who, long before, had revealed the truth about Putin's infidelities to his wife.

2012 – Vladimir Zhirinovsky, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and State Duma deputy, divorced his wife, Galina. We've already discussed his moral character and sexual behavior, so it's safe to assume their marriage was largely a formality for many years. Zhirinovsky likely divorced in 2012 for the same formal purpose – to hide the property registered in his wife's name from the obligation to declare it (at that time, officials and deputies were required by law to publicly disclose the property of their entire families). Several members of the Russian parliament resorted to such sham divorces.

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2012 – Dmitry Peskov, the president's press secretary and aide, leaves his wife, Ekaterina. Despite Ekaterina's lack of employment and her husband's career as a government official, the divorce settlement leaves his wife with expensive real estate in Russia and France, acquired through unknown means (Putin's press secretary and his wives will be featured in our book). 2013 – Putin himself

separates from his wife, Lyudmila. However, by that point, the two had long since separated.

2013 – Putin's friend, billionaire Arkady Rotenberg, divorced his second wife, Natalya. Natalya is an attractive and simple girl from Kurgan. It's a depressed region, like Mari El, where a good marriage is often the only winning ticket in life. Rotenberg met his future wife in a Moscow nightclub. In marriage, Natalya turned out to be not such a simpleton. "I'll have a child only for a new fur coat," she once told her husband, and she actually gave birth (a witness to this eloquent conversation was Rotenberg's business partner, with whom we spoke).

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(The marriage took place years later.247). The son was named Arkady, after his father, which didn't stop the couple from soon beginning divorce proceedings. Arkady Sr. had every reason to regret his excessive trust in his wife: as a result of the lawsuit Natalia initiated in the UK, Rotenberg lost a significant portion of his fortune and expensive real estate. Although his loss was not as catastrophic as Markelov's.

2014 – Sergei Sobyanin, the mayor of Moscow, one of Putin's likely successors (according to the public) and his constant companion at bachelor parties on the eve of Easter, divorces his wife Irina after almost 30 years of marriage.

2017 – Igor Sechin divorced again, this time from his second wife, Olga, for whom he had left his previous wife six years earlier. According to the press, Olga fled Sechin for an Italian race car driver (very similar to the Markelov case). The second divorce cost the no longer young Putin servant far more than the first. In addition to the financial losses, there was also heartache. A luxury yacht, secretly purchased for his lover and named "Princess," was lost.

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Sechin kept the title "Olga" for himself, but renamed it "True Love"248. The extremely expensive house in the Moscow region, built for Olga, was torn down to the ground by her abandoned husband, and in its place, without regard for expenses, he built a new one. The silhouette of the new house resembles the letter Zh, which is why people nicknamed it "the ass"249. However, for *Se-*

The rank became that everyone made fun of him.
circle - this often happens with cuckolded husbands
total.

This list could go on and on.
and continue, constantly coming across anecdotal examples. But history has little in the way of anecdotes. Officials and the oligarchs associated with them, who had built their careers on the praise of "family values," suddenly began divorcing their elderly wives en masse and just as en masse taking on, mostly secretly, younger companions. In many cases, the divorces of Putin's vassals were accompanied by the division of enormous property, which none of the officials could legally earn enough to purchase. Naturally, none of the divorced people considered it necessary to explain to the Russian people the origins of their family

prosperity.

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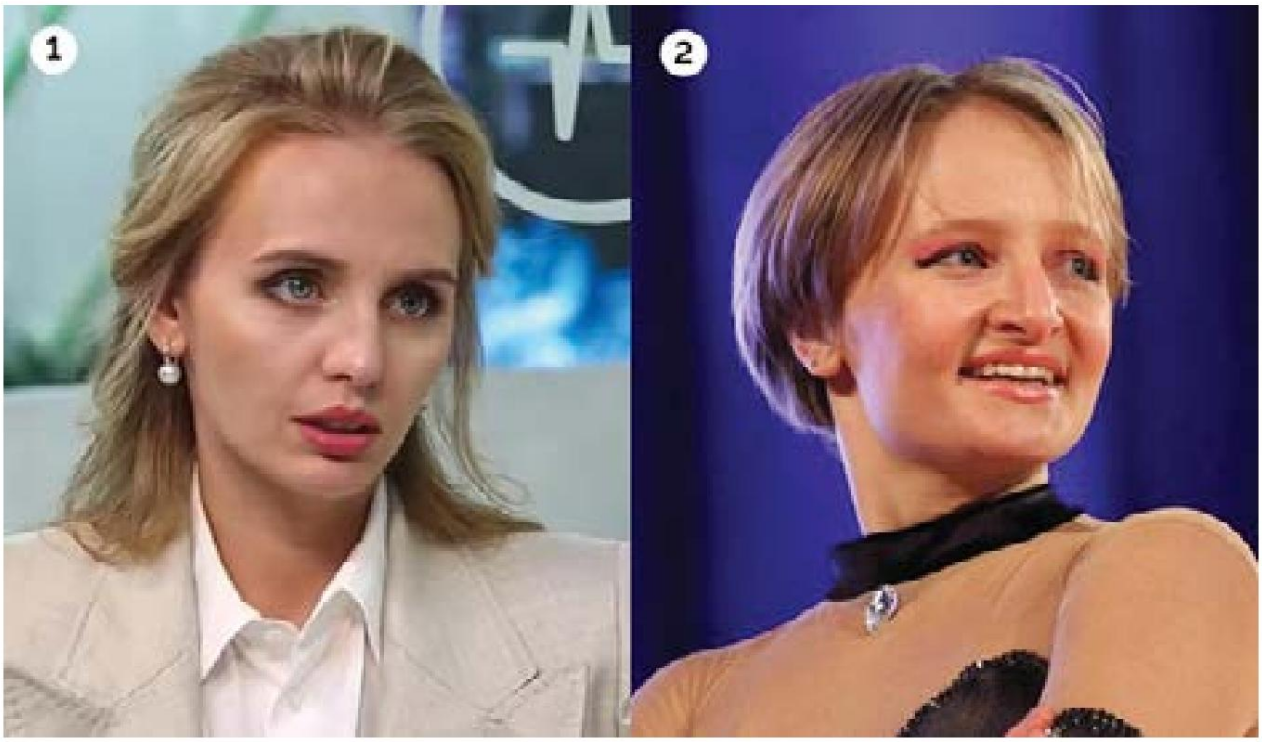
However, there were two more telling details in this divorce story. First, people in Putin's circle, having divorced their spouses, seemed to have lost faith in the institution of marriage. We've already reported that Putin himself did not marry Alina Kabaeva (at least not according to secular laws). He apparently gave the same advice to his daughters. The eldest, Maria, entered into a civil union with Dutchman Jorrit Faassen in the mid-2000s. The youngest, Katya, married Kirill Shamalov, the son of Putin's friend Nikolai Shamalov, in a church wedding, but did not formalize the marriage.



Putin's daughters: 1. Maria Vorontsova; 2. Katerina Tikhonova.

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In both cases, as journalists established, lavish wedding parties were held (Putin married Katerina at a resort that he gave to his mistress, Svetlana Krivonogikh). The fact that, despite the celebrations, the marriage was not formalized in either case was discovered later. 250 This became known, in particular, from documents that Faassen and Shamalov submitted to Western banks to register real estate and bank accounts. In these documents, both describe themselves as "single." Why? The answer seems obvious, but before we get to it, let us name the second feature of Putin's matrimonial behavior. The Russian president is a maniacal miser. As

follows from dozens of documents we studied. 251, the president tries to give almost no property to his loved ones - his wife, children, and, probably, mistresses. Or rather, this is how it is: all of Putin's close ones -

very wealthy people, they can enjoy many earthly blessings that are inaccessible to ordinary Russians, but when it comes to legally registered ownership, for example, real estate, it turns out that all the wealth,

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Essentially, it remains in the hands of the president himself. Here's a telling example. The young family of Masha Putina and Jorrit Faassen needed a house. So they got two—in a super-prestigious area of the Moscow region, across the fence from Putin's residence, so the children would be closer to their father. But love had its limits: the houses were prudently registered to an offshore company managing Putin's money. After Faassen and Putina separated, these houses remained in the presidential offshore company. It's a similar story with Lyudmila and Katya. Putin also gave his ex-wife a house next to his residence, but on paper, Lyudmila never owned it for a single day. Putin granted Kirill and Katya two houses in the same area and initially even registered both in the name of his son-in-law (perhaps the fact that Shamalov is the son of the president's "St. Petersburg" friend played a role). But as soon as Kirill cheated on Katerina in 2016, his house was taken away from him and re-registered to other presidential friends.

Gennady Timchenko and Arkady Rotenberg. Something similar happened with Shamalov's intangible assets. A large stake in the chemical giant Sibur was a wedding gift for

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The young bon vivant who made him a billionaire had to be returned after the divorce. Even Kirill's father, Nikolai Shamalov, with whom Putin began his shady dealings 30 years ago in St. Petersburg, fared poorly. After the children's divorce, Putin's former brother-in-law lost his stake in the very same Rossiya Bank he had co-founded with Putin and other "St. Petersburgers." To conclude the description of this family's suffering, we will share a memorable detail that can serve as a perfect allegory for the everyday life of Putin's courtiers. When young Kirill and Katya acquired a luxurious house near Moscow, it had everything: fashionable design, expensive jewelry, paintings by famous artists. The only thing missing was a mere trifle—a laundry. However, there was a dry cleaner at Putin's residence next door—where the presidential suits were cleaned by civil servants paid from the Russian budget. There's a telling passage in Kirill Shamalov's correspondence with Katerina. The Russian ruler's son-in-law asks his wife, the heir to the throne, to inquire with her father whether Kirill could occasionally use the royal laundry at state expense.

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Consent to this, apparently, was granted. Although it was probably revoked with the divorce.

There's another incredible story connected to Putin and his family life, one we can't help but tell. As we previously reported, Lyudmila and Vladimir Putin separated long before their divorce in 2013. And both had lovers long before that date, too. Putin's chosen one was mid-level businessman Artur Ocheretny, 20 years her junior. The circumstances of their meeting are shrouded in mystery. It's hard to imagine the wife of a sitting president committing adultery with a random man in full view of her security detail. That's why some in Putin's inner circle have always claimed that Ocheretny is a police officer himself, delegated by her unfaithful husband to perform an intimate mission for his abandoned wife. This sounds very Putin-esque, although we've never found any connections between Ocheretny and the law enforcement agencies. But imagine our surprise when we discovered documents and other evidence that back in 2010, that is, long before the divorce, Putin used his personal offshore account to purchase an apartment in northwest Moscow for Lyudmila and her young lover. This apartment was not

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An example of ostentatious luxury, though not all Muscovites could afford it. For a time, the property was registered to Ocheretny, meaning it looked as if the Russian ruler had bestowed the house on the lover of his abandoned wife. But this high-society relationship lasted only until 2013. When Lyudmila became free of the bonds of marriage and decided to marry Ocheretny, the apartment was confiscated and transferred back to Putin's offshore company. "What's mine is mine," said a character in a famous film, unwilling to hand over even his dirty underwear to criminals. Similarly, Putin, the owner of untold wealth and enormous influence, doesn't part with even his three-room apartment on Leningradsky Prospekt.

Here's the answer to the question posed above. Advocates of "traditional values" avoid legally binding marriages and hide their complicated personal relationships for one simple reason: money and property seem to be more important to them than love and family. We'll discuss money in the next part of the book, but for now, a few words about the heroes of this chapter.

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Leonid Markelov, already in prison, will marry the nanny of his own children, born from his marriage to Irina Starygina. The marriage will be official. Putin's daughters, having divorced Faassen and Shamalov, will remarry—again unofficially—to an engineer and a ballet master. Both families lead discreet, but likely quite comfortable, lives. So do all the other aforementioned heroes—husbands, wives, lovers, and mistresses. Only Igor Sechin, as an acquaintance recounted, resembled a stray dog for a long time after the divorce: "He was as happy at the beginning of his affair with Olga as he was unhappy at the end."

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Part three

Modesty and patriotism

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1. The housing issue

How Vladimir Putin Wanted to Become a Rich Man

The concept of wealth was quite relative in the Soviet Union. Often, simply having a separate living space, even the most modest, made a person a well-off member of society. One could also become wealthy in the eyes of others through access to the distribution system for scarce goods, closed to most citizens—members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union or employees of the security services could aspire to this. The parents of one of the authors of this book, ordinary Soviet employees, celebrated their silver wedding anniversary in the mid-1980s—25 years together. On such occasions, the state sometimes granted its citizens a one-time chance to touch "wealth." Parents

Millions were given a coupon to visit a special store where they could "shop" for something in short supply without having to wait in line. Relatives and friends had provided the happy couple with money and instructions ahead of time on what, who, and how much they needed to buy. On the designated day, the parents came to the store, where

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The only other people there were salespeople. Having presented a coupon, they bought a ton of things—from winter boots for themselves to a cooler bag for distant relatives. Among the purchases, one item stood out: a Chinese-made thermos, an item incredibly valuable in the USSR, since the Soviet economy, for some reason, did not produce thermoses of any quality. When the parents returned home, they had a hard time deciding: they needed the thermos themselves, but someone in their family had also asked for one. Ultimately, the thermos remained at home, and a conflict broke out between the supposedly close people—some couldn't forgive the others for having a Chinese thermos and they didn't. In short, in the Soviet Union, one could be considered rich even thanks to a Chinese thermos. To say nothing of a car!

Young Vladimir Putin acquired a car as early as 1972. This fact, as well as some other observations,254 led some biographers of the Russian president to conclude that Putin was not poor in his youth, as he himself often claimed. Compared to those who quarreled over a thermos, the owner of a car certainly seemed like a well-off fellow. But the truly rich...

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Putin wasn't poor—or rather, he was definitely poor. Imagine being 20 years old, owning a car but having no place to live, forced to share a room with your elderly parents, and in a communal apartment at that. It was rare for someone in the Soviet Union to own a car without their own living space. Putin himself attributed this oddity to luck and the benevolence of his mother. Maria Putina (the rest of the story is quoted from her son) won the car in the lottery. Upon learning of their success, the Putins held a family council to decide what to do with the winnings—take the car or cash its value, which would allow them to improve their living conditions. Volodya's mother spoke up: a car is more important to a young man. Putin truly did enjoy using his car. As his friend Sergei Roldugin later recounted, in the 1970s they often drove the car they had won in the lottery together. Roldugin, whom we will mention many times in this chapter, will subsequently benefit greatly from his joint travels with Putin. But for Putin himself, his mother's decision will likely have a negative impact: modest housing

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The harsh conditions in which he had to live throughout his youth and a significant part of his young adulthood would in the future shape the president's manic fixation on real estate. But for now, two more

words about the car.

That story, if Putin told it honestly, had one important nuance: the lottery. 1972 was a time of extreme popularity for the DOSAAF lottery (most likely, it was Putin's mother who played it). A ticket cost 30 kopecks, and the proceeds went to defense needs. Putina either bought the ticket or received it at work instead of change at the cafeteria, as her son later claimed. In any case, rich people don't play the lottery, don't follow its results, and don't... drive a Zaporozhets. It was this car that the Putins won, and it was the one student Volodya and musician Sergei drove throughout their youth. A 1972 Zaporozhets

It was nicknamed "the big-eared car" for its protruding air intakes. It was ugly inside and out, extremely uncomfortable, and unreliable. Even against the backdrop of Soviet poverty, the owner of a Zaporozhets was considered a freak, not a rich man.

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When Putin parked his Zaporozhets and came home, he was greeted by even less comfortable conditions. In one of the most important Russian novels of the 20th century, "The Master and Margarita," the devil comes to the Soviet Union and subtly remarks about the locals: "People are like people. The housing problem only spoiled them." The "housing problem" could not help but spoil several generations of Soviet citizens, including Putin. Not only did most of them not own property,

but only received it from the state, and this real estate was terrible. People had to live in so-called communal apartments -

Several families were housed in them, each of which was given a small room where parents and children of all ages, and often grandparents, were crowded together. One toilet,

a kitchen and a bathroom—all of this was shared by dozens of neighbors who were constantly arguing with each other. However, a bathroom was a rarity in the first decades after the war; even Putin didn't have one during his school years. "No hot water, no bath. The toilet was terrible, it somehow cut right into the landing. Cold, creepy. The stairs with metal

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"There were railings. It was dangerous to walk on, all chipped and cracked. There was practically no kitchen. Just a dark, square, windowless corridor. On one side was a gas stove, on the other, a sink. And you couldn't squeeze through," Vera Gurevich, Putin's teacher, recalled of the future president's apartment.255 Several million Russians still live in communal apartments and dormitories,256

although their resettlement began in the 1950s. Around that time, Vladimir Spiridonovich, Putin's father, joined the party committee at the factory where he worked as a worker. Party committee members had priority for a separate apartment. But, according to family legend,257 Putin Sr. believed that others needed separate housing more. So, the future president of Russia lived in the same room with his parents and in the same apartment with his neighbors for the first 25 years of his life. It was only in 1977 that the Putins were given a separate apartment – although, unlike the old communal apartment, it was located far from the city center.

In other words, Putin lived with his parents (albeit in a separate room for the first time), even working

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Putin was an officer in the all-powerful KGB of the USSR. He couldn't even dream of his own apartment, even the smallest one. And he especially needed one because his parents disliked his girlfriend, and later wife, Lyudmila. At their very first meeting in 1980, Putin's mother felt it necessary to say right in front of her: "She's all right. But he already had Lyuda. A good girl."258 The "old" Lyuda is most likely Lyudmila Khmarina, whom Volodya abandoned right before the wedding (her brother, Viktor Khmarin, won't be offended by Putin; he himself would soon marry the future president's cousin, and even later become his latest assistant in his shady dealings). Six months after meeting Putin, the "new" Lyudmila moved from her native Kaliningrad to Leningrad, where she first briefly rented a room in a communal apartment and then moved into a dormitory. "Vladimir Vladimirovich lived with his parents, who probably were never able to fully accept me," she recalled bitterly.259 After their wedding, Putin's parents were finally forced to accept Lyudmila into their cramped home, but it was a very difficult experience for everyone. How difficult remains to be seen.

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According to this episode: when Putin's first daughter, Masha, was born, Lyudmila, along with the baby, chose to move away from her in-laws. Just before the birth, she rented an apartment in Leningrad, opposite the Putins, and went there with the baby straight from the maternity hospital. The future president was studying in Moscow at the time, preparing for a business trip abroad. He came to visit his wife for just three days, and then returned to the capital. For Lyudmila, this was nothing but a relief. "Since he wasn't busy with diapers, groceries, or preparing breakfast, lunch, and dinner, it actually became easier for me after his departure, because I had to take care of two people—my husband and my child—and otherwise, all I had left was Masha," she recalled.

For the first time in their lives, Vladimir and Lyudmila Putin (first with their daughter Masha, and later with Katya) found themselves in a separate, albeit temporary, apartment when they were 33 and 27 years old, respectively—in Dresden, Germany, in a building housing KGB officers. By Soviet standards, the family lived there in literal luxury; Lyudmila, however, skimped on clothes, out of habit.

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sewing clothes for herself. But Putin bought a car -
A Volga (it was his third car in his life—upon his arrival in Germany, the future president initially used a company Zhiguli with his colleague Sergei Chemezov), as well as a television, a tape recorder, and a video player. But the "housing problem" continued to hang over the Putins like a curse. In early 1990, the family returned to Leningrad (Lyudmila was robbed on the way home), and their housing problems began again. The only place they could settle was Putin's parents' three-room apartment (the elder Putins received it from the state in place of their old two-room apartment—

(thanks to the fact that Vladimir Spiridonovich was a disabled war veteran and was entitled to benefits). The new housing, although larger than the previous one, required expenses. "I must admit, the apartment was in terrible condition, and there was no money for repairs," recalled Lyudmila. There was no choice - Putin's 80-year-old parents and a young family with two children ended up living there. Shalva Chigirinsky, an influential Moscow businessman, whom we have already introduced, formed

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Chigirinsky, who amassed his billion-dollar fortune thanks to his close friendship with the authorities, first saw Putin at the apartment of St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak in the mid-1990s. Something caught Chigirinsky's eye back then: the dark shirt Putin was wearing under his business suit. "Sobchak's apartment had its own style, wealth, and antiques. And here was this man whose shirt and tie didn't fit his neck," laughs Chigirinsky, chatting with us in Wiesbaden, in the lobby of the luxurious Nassauer Hof Hotel. The Russian president has stayed there at least once, a fact that particularly amuses our interlocutor. Chigirinsky has a score to settle with Putin, whose people deprived him of his Russian business and forced him to leave the country.

nitsa.

Leaving aside his snobbish style claims, Chigirinsky is right about the main point: even high in the government hierarchy in the 1990s, Putin neither looked nor was a rich man. But his taste for the high life and his first attempts to embrace it date back to that period. And these attempts, once again, are tied to square footage.

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It all began with Sobchak's aforementioned apartment—it was located in the heart of St. Petersburg, at 31 Moika Embankment, across from the building where Alexander Pushkin once lived. Putin's boss acquired the apartment on the Moika in 1990, when Sobchak became head of the Leningrad City Council. Before his political career, he lived in a modest apartment on the outskirts. Two apartments—an old one and a new one—were

incomparable in terms of both prestige and price (even though there was no free real estate market in the Soviet Union). This fact greatly interested the Leningrad City Council deputies, who launched the first investigation into Sobchak's political career. 261 It turned out that he had obtained his apartment in the center through connections—through a structure with the unpronounceable name of Lengorzhilobmen. This company managed state-owned housing, in particular apartments expropriated from former residents —for example, those who emigrated to Israel, leaving their square meters to the state. The scheme allowed for the exchange of an apartment on the outskirts for more expensive housing in the very center of the city—Lengorzhilobmen simply

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He added at least two additional rooms to the chain of transactions, three then-Leningrad City Council deputies recalled in conversation with the authors. A source who worked in the city council's office is certain that Sobchak's young assistant, KGB officer Vladimir Putin, who had connections in the Leningrad Lobby, helped implement this scheme for his boss.262 This version is indirectly supported by the fact that the family of Putin's friend Sergei Roldugin acquired a huge apartment next door to Sobchak's—a 160-square-meter apartment in another entrance hall of the same building (Roldugin's ex-wife, Irina Nikitina, still lives in this apartment).

Was Putin really such an altruist that he helped his boss and friend find apartments, but neglected himself? At first glance, it seemed so. But in reality, it was Putin's wife who suffered most from the housing insecurity of the early 1990s. Her husband, a rising city hall official, simply never showed up at the apartment where Lyudmila, her in-laws, and children lived. "It was as if my husband had disappeared from the house, run away," Lyudmila recalled with resentment, explaining that her husband was "immersed in..."

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"He got back to work."263 Where did Putin spend his time? The fact is that the new government, having barely removed the CPSU from governing the country, immediately began redistributing property. And Putin, who had become Sobchak's right-hand man, played a key role in this redistribution. In particular, the mayor's office received former CPSU properties—for example, the White Nights party sanatorium, one of the luxurious government residences on Kamenny Island, as well as the Smolninskaya and Mercury hotels. The young official Putin, who had never owned his own home before, eagerly used all of these properties, recalls a journalist working in St. Petersburg at the time: "At the Smolninskaya, which stands directly across from Putin's office in the Smolny Palace, the deputy mayor held visitor receptions; he had an apartment there, where he often simply lived."264 As a result, Putin resolved his personal “housing issue” only in 1993, when he was already over 40. Then, again with the help of the Lenin Housing Exchange and cunning, he was finally able to

to live with his parents: they received new housing in the city center, and Putin with Lyudmila and their daughters

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He moved into a large apartment on Vasilievsky Island. He received help from the head of the Vasileostrovsky district, former KGB officer Valery Golubev (Putin brought him into the city administration and later to Gazprom). For his assistance, Golubev also received a large apartment nearby. The previous residents were relocated outside the city limits.

From all of the above, it's clear that square footage captivated the minds of Putin's circle. Sobchak himself, while he was mayor, greatly expanded his apartment on the Moika River—a neighboring communal apartment was annexed, and its residents were hastily relocated. It was this story that the Prosecutor General's Office, headed by Yuri Skuratov, would seize upon in 1995–1996 when, at the Kremlin's request, it began investigating the "Sobchak case." Another almost fantastical story also happened with this same apartment on the Moika River, which could serve as an epigraph to that period of Putin's biography. In addition to the neighboring communal apartment, Sobchak's family wanted an attic—a penthouse with access to the roof. And so the city allocated him an apartment on the top floor—under the guise of a creative studio for

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the mayor's wife (as far as we know, she was not known to be involved in art). But here's the problem: Sobchak lives on the fourth floor, and the attic—

On the sixth floor. The neighbor on the fifth floor was very upset that they decided to build a staircase to the roof right on his square footage. Then people from Roman Tsepov, Putin's friend and bodyguard, came to him and convinced him not to speak out. [The sentence is incomplete and likely a mistranslation.] In a nutshell—square footage—is how the future president's career began.

Nikolai Andrushchenko, former

member of the Leningrad City Council

and a journalist, once recalled his private conversation with Putin in the first half of the 1990s. "We need to make money!" Putin said to Andrushchenko in a deserted corridor of the Mariinsky Theater, and then repeated the phrase twice more. 266 The context of the conversation is not entirely clear, but Putin almost certainly meant that a government position is a way to earn money. As we recalled above, the Putin family has always been interested in additional income, not particularly considering the fact that this is unacceptable for an official (although in Russia in the 1990s there was no clear legislation on this matter). When Putin first

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When Lyudmila was invited to work at the Kremlin in 1996, she complained to her German friend, Irene Pietsch, that Vladimir would hardly be able to moonlight.267 Here, Lyudmila was categorically mistaken about her spouse—Putin had earned a great deal of extra income, always illegal, throughout his entire career. This "moonlighting" began in St. Petersburg in the 1990s.

Both Putin's critics and admirers, then and now, acknowledge his strengths: he's good with numbers, with profit, he has a keen sense of business and administration, and, finally, he can be diligent. Early in his career, he demonstrated considerable zeal in his work, trying to please his superiors by handling boring and difficult issues for others—property, finances, and the like. Moreover, compared to Sobchak, who was an excellent orator but, by all accounts, a lousy manager, Putin emerged as an outstanding organizer.

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Working moments at the St. Petersburg City Hall

As head of the Foreign Relations Committee, and since 1994 also as First Deputy Mayor, Putin concentrated enormous powers in his hands. Not a single branch of a foreign company was opened in St. Petersburg without his knowledge, and not a single important economic decision requiring the participation of the mayor's office, such as privatization, was made without his approval.

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We've already reported how Putin and his friends privatized Bank Rossiya, where the Communist Party's money had previously been stored, for their own benefit. What else, besides the party legacy, was attractive in St. Petersburg, what could have interested the business-minded deputy mayor? Of course, the port and its surrounding infrastructure. Russian resources were shipped west through the port, primarily oil and its derivatives—perhaps the only thing young Russia was reliably supplying abroad at the time. Everyday goods and industrial equipment arrived in the opposite direction through the port and customs terminals. The St. Petersburg seaport is an important enterprise; the economies of a significant part of the European regions depend on its continuous operation.

onov of the country.

In short, the entire business at the once state-owned port was privatized and divided up in the 1990s by criminal kingpins with connections to Putin. They will be discussed in the next part of the book. But there was one episode in the port's history that we will recount in detail now—it is very telling for that period of Putin's rule.

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Biographies. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the company Sovex appeared in St. Petersburg. It owned part of the fuel terminal at the port and also refueled aircraft at the city airport. Sovex's office, as we already mentioned, occupied a small building that had been converted from a public restroom on Kamenny Island. Later, the Yavara-Neva judo club moved in—the very same one that Putin's friends had founded together with him.

"Bandits." Putin visited the bathhouse there, even as president.268

It's clear that Putin has a soft spot for this building. Maybe it's because

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that he was a co-owner of the company "Sovex".
This was probably his first company—or certainly one of his first. Of course, Putin couldn't legally own a business, and where would a government official have gotten the money to buy a stake in a company? Putin secretly received 4% of Sovex's capital simply because the city, through him, allowed the company to do business in the port. Sovex's other initial shareholders were Maxim Freidzon and Dmitry Skigin (the two met in their youth, when they lived next door to each other). If you recall, the trio frequented the Luna strip bar—the future president hosted receptions there, and Skigin and Freidzon would come to negotiate with him. Later, criminal groups would seize Freidzon's stake in Sovex, he would be brutally beaten, and the businessman would eventually leave Russia.

We would never have known about Putin's secret fuel business if Freidzon hadn't filed a lawsuit in New York in 2014 over his stake in Sovex. In addition to the lawsuit, Freidzon gave several candid interviews about how Putin conducted business in the 1990s. "I know from my partner (Skigin) that Putin demanded a share in our

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business. At first, he wanted 15%, but we managed to get it down to four. Of course, this wasn't registered in any official documents,"

This is how Freidzon described the expansion of Sovex's shareholder base. 269 This phrase reveals something important about Putin at that time. Not only was he content with a very minority stake in the company. It is striking that Putin easily and quite significantly lowered his demands. Of course, years later, not only regional businessmen, but even the richest Russian oligarchs would be unable to negotiate with him. But back then, in the mid-1990s, he did not disdain any additional income that his official position provided. As Freidzon himself put it when one of the authors of this book last met him in New York, Putin then tried "not to

"to let nothing pass by."

"Nesun" is a unique slang word that was actively used in Russian for about a decade. This is how state propaganda stigmatized those who *carried* something from their workplace—that is, stole from the state, because there was no other employer in the USSR.

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the word naturally came into circulation at the end of the USSR, when economic problems were growing in the country, and disappeared at once as soon as the Union collapsed along with the state monopoly on property ness.

Crocodile Magazine, No. 33, November 1983

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But the phenomenon behind the word hasn't gone away. Putin probably read feuilletons about slanderers in the Soviet press in the 1980s, and in the 1990s he himself became.

There was something else important in the history of Sovex. Through this business, Vladimir Putin first became acquainted with the workings of the offshore economy. His job description already expected him to be a patriot, someone concerned about the prosperity of his hometown and country, but in reality, things were quite different. Sovex's proceeds ended up in the accounts of a company called Gorizont, registered in Liechtenstein—the most famous offshore company in continental Europe. Gorizont wasn't just the recipient of Putin's money—for many years, the company became a gateway through which major criminal groups in St. Petersburg funneled funds from Russia to Europe. In other words, Putin turned out to be a new generation *of thief:* he took the stolen goods not home, but directly abroad, where they were stored under the watchful eye of his acquaintances.

Who are the nominees, the people who are ready to sacrifice their reputation for a certain fee?

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Putin also learned about the profits and comforts of others at Sovex. Dmitry Skigin, Freidzon's neighbor on Kirovsky Prospekt in Leningrad, started out as a mountain climber and enterprising trader and ended up as a figurehead for Putin and St. Petersburg gangsters. In the 1990s, he somehow, probably legally, acquired a Greek passport, becoming Dimitrios, and moved to Europe (first to Monaco, from where he was expelled for dubious connections, and then to France). There, he managed companies registered in his name on behalf of his bosses in St. Petersburg and likely would have had every chance of becoming an important figurehead in Putin's inner circle had he not died of cancer in 2003. However, his father's place in the web of companies connected to the St. Petersburg port was taken by Dimitrios Skigin's young son, Mikhail. There will be many more nominations in Putin's career.

lov, but they all started their activities back then, in the 90s. Their names will mean so little to most readers that they could be written as the names of medications Putin took for years—

Oleggordin, Peterkolbin, Alexanderplekhov, Vik-Torkhmarin. However, there was one denomination, just behind-

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A servant of two capital letters: Sergei Roldugin. Yes, that same friend of Putin's youth, his companion on trips in a Zaporozhets, and later a famous cellist, also works as Putin's proxy. The world would likely never have learned of Roldugin's secret work if, in 2016, a large group of journalists from various countries hadn't published an investigation based on a leak of documents from a Panamanian offshore company registrar. The leak, dubbed the "Panama Papers," revealed the names of many influential people hiding money in offshore accounts, but one name stood out in particular. It turned out that billions of dollars had passed through offshore companies registered to a famous Russian musician. Whatever Roldugin's musical royalties, they clearly didn't correspond to the turnover of his companies. Investigators didn't have to guess for long whose money was actually hidden in offshore accounts. The Kremlin itself had been representing Sergei Pavlovich Roldugin for many years,

the renowned musician as a personal friend of President Putin. If you remember, Roldugin was the narrator in the first two biographies of Putin.

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(which means his candidacy for this role was approved by the Kremlin). In these books, he recalled such personal details about his friend that it was obvious to everyone: if Roldugin was hiding someone's money, then that someone now rules Russia. The Kremlin and Roldugin half-heartedly and implausibly denied the corrupt connection, but the deed was done. Roldugin's musical career was ruined; he was now better known as "Putin's wallet" rather than as

cellist, and even the word "cellist"
became part of Russian slang with the meaning "but-
past.

However, the 2016 investigation had no legal consequences for Putin. All previous attempts to investigate his corruption also failed. Neither the Prosecutor General's Office (we've already discussed this), nor the Leningrad City Council deputies, who repeatedly attempted to investigate the activities of Sobchak and his deputy, succeeded. All cases will be completely closed once the latter becomes president. Marina Salye, a Leningrad City Council deputy and one of the leaders of the group investigating Putin's work, will retire and move to a remote village (partly out of fear for her life271).

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She died of a heart attack in 2012, but not before sharing a wealth of information about the St. Petersburg phase of Putin's life. Many articles, investigations, and books, including ours, are largely based on facts once collected by Marina Salye. Thank her for that!

Putin's parents, Maria Ivanovna and Vladimir Spiridonovich, also died, in 1998 and 1999, respectively. Until their deaths, they lived in a 70-square-meter apartment in St. Petersburg. Compared to their first communal apartment, it was a tsarist apartment. life.

At that point, their son was already very high in the country's leadership. Putin asked to see his father in the hospital for the last time shortly before becoming the head of the Russian government in August 1999. [272] Along with him, Anatoly Sobchak, Putin's "political father," who would also die just six months later, came to the hospital. An important conversation took place in Putin Sr.'s hospital room...

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2. The greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century

How Putin fell in love with foreign countries

Putin's father died at the ripe old age of 88. In his final years, he had been seriously ill with cancer, complicated by heart problems, from which he eventually died while lying in an oncology clinic. As his son once admitted, Vladimir Sr. was initially misdiagnosed, and the time for treatment may have been missed. So, when Vladimir Putin visited his father in the summer of 1999, both the patient and the guests in the ward understood that this was quite likely their last conversation. And therefore, it was important. The father, as they said, was confident that his son was about to lead the country (at that time, only Yeltsin's "family" knew about this), and therefore placed certain political hopes on his heir. He told Putin Jr. that he expected Crimea to become Russian again one day. Father

He also admitted to his son that he misses the national anthem of the Soviet Union, which was abolished with the collapse of the USSR in 1991. This part is

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The story was recounted to the authors by a person closely acquainted with one of the hospital's visitors. It may well be apocryphal, but there is an important fact that other Putin biographers often forget. Crimea, or more precisely, the Russian (and formerly Soviet) naval base in Sevastopol, is a place dear to the elder Putin. He spent some time there before the war as a sailor on a Black Sea Fleet submarine.

kremlin.ru

It is significant that Putin Jr. was the first to mention the Sevastopol episode of his father’s bio-

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In his article, published on the eve of May 9, 2015, that is, on the first anniversary of the occupation of Crimea (we will say something important about this article at the end of the book). Add to this the fact that a photograph of the young father in a naval cap always hung in the president's office (and it was with this photograph that he participated in the "Immortal Regiment" march six times). In short, the Crimean-Naval part of the family history clearly seemed important to Putin.

As for the Soviet anthem composed by Alexander Alexandrov, Putin Jr. returned it much earlier than Crimea. This, in fact, was one of Putin's first decisions after being elected president in 2000. In the fall, athletes came to him with a complaint: during the awards ceremony at the recently concluded Sydney Olympics, they had nothing to sing. Indeed, from 1991 to 2000, Russia had, so to speak, a temporary anthem, the melody of "Patriotic Song" by composer Mikhail Glinka (not only did the song have no words, it was also considered an unfinished work). A wordless anthem did indeed sound strange, but it seemed strange

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And the haste with which Putin rushed to address this issue as soon as he became president. By December 2000, the corresponding law had already been passed, and on New Year's Eve, the new-old anthem was played on Russian television.

Without knowing the contents of Putin's deeply personal conversation with his ailing father, one might assume that the Russian leader was, from the very beginning of his political career, a staunch revanchist and champion of all things Soviet. But this is yet another of Putin's political masks, later donned to achieve personal goals.

In 2005, while addressing parliament, Putin uttered a phrase that would later be quoted perhaps more often than any other utterance by the Russian president. He called the collapse of the USSR "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century." He would return to this phrase many times afterward, sometimes changing the wording, but it was always clear that Putin was comfortable with the image he had created.

The facts, however, suggest that at the moment when the USSR was collapsing, Putin was not concerned with geopolitics. politics - he was interested in completely different, purely mathematical

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Real issues. The Union ceased to exist in December 1991 after the signing of the so-called Belovezh Accords. The last president of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, resigned on December 25. Confusion reigned in the country (or rather, in *the countries* that emerged from the formerly unified state). A telling sign of this was the embarrassment on New Year's Eve. Midnight on January 1, 1992, was the only occasion when the country was congratulated on the New Year not by the head of state, but by stand-up comedian Mikhail Zadornov, who, by coincidence, was on live television at the time. And what about Putin? Did he mourn the collapse of the Union in those days? We, of course, cannot say what was going on in Putin's *soul ,* but we know what was on his *mind then.* It was in December 1991 and January 1992 that the "Resources for Food" operation, which we described at the beginning of the book, unfolded in St. Petersburg. At that time, companies associated with Putin's friends

received exclusive rights to export and sell valuable raw materials abroad, from oil to rare earth metals. With the proceeds from the deal

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They were supposed to buy and bring food to St. Petersburg with the money, but they brought clearly less than planned (later, even Putin himself was forced to admit this partially277). This operation required considerable effort from the novice official of the St. Petersburg mayor's office: Marina Salye's investigation revealed that in December and January, Putin was in regular contact with Moscow, coordinating quotas for the export of raw materials and resolving other organizational issues278. In the end, the operation did not bring much benefit to the city, but it certainly brought in income for businessmen from Putin's circle—

To Gennady Timchenko, Vladimir Smirnov, Vladimir Yakunin, and the family of Putin's classmate
Ilgam Ragimov and, likely, others. Even if we accept that Putin and his confidants acted with good intentions and made mistakes only due to inexperience, this does not eliminate the claim that Putin obstructed the investigation of the events of December 1991 for many years—

January 1992. Neither he nor any of the participants
The man behind those deals did not even suffer any official punishment for his failures.

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With Mikhail Gorbachev and his wife Raisa in 1994. Putin is smiling and polite with the man who stood behind the so-called "biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century."
century.

Besik Pipia/ RIA Novosti

A former official who interacted with Putin in the 1990s describes him this way: "Look at him. He's wearing a crimson jacket, yellow trousers, a floor-length cashmere coat. Soviet people, especially KGB people, didn't dress like that. He looked ridiculous, but he clearly wanted to show off. He was fascinated by capitalism, fascinated by money."279 None of our interlocutors who worked in St. Petersburg during those years

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I don’t remember Putin showing any signs of nostalgia for the Union or hatred of the West back then.

Putin, wearing a then-fashionable double-breasted jacket and a colorful shirt, in the company of acquaintances connected to show business, during the Goodwill Games in St. Petersburg in 1994.

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Putin in a double-breasted coat almost to the floor during the election campaign of mayor Sobchak in 1996, in the company of his boss, a security guard and ordinary citizens.

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Putin, presumably in the interior of his first separate apartment on Vasilievsky Island, with a portable radiotelephone and in an extravagant outfit - a sheepskin coat worn over a tracksuit.

In 2023, a Finnish TV channel showed unique footage preserved in a private collection.

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The footage shows Putin and Sobchak, along with their wives, security guards, and several colleagues, relaxing on the Finnish island of Torsø. The Russians are happily playing table tennis and darts, fishing, eating, and drinking. According to the recollections of Putin's then-colleague, the events took place in early May 1992, less than six months after the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century." What do the Russian guests talk about at the table at such a difficult moment? They discuss the merits of real estate in European countries—in France, in Switzerland. Real estate again. The jokes from those gathered are also about material things—Sobchak laughs that he was served meat on the bone: "They'll say the mayor gnaws on bones." Incidentally, the place where Putin and Sobchak were vacationing is a villa owned by the large Finnish company Thomesto. She wanted to establish timber supplies through St. Petersburg and invited Russian politicians to visit. From a business and political ethics perspective, this was certainly bribery, but it concerned young Russian officials as little as the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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In all fairness, it's worth noting that there's one constant in Putin's attitude toward the West, something he's never changed to suit his personal needs. Putin has a characteristically negative attitude toward the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Examples of aggressive attacks against these states are scattered throughout Putin's speeches over the years, but the most memorable episode also occurred in the 1990s, when the future president was still working in St. Petersburg. In the spring of 1994, during a gala reception in Hamburg, Putin represented the St. Petersburg government. The reception was attended by German politicians and distinguished guests from other countries, including Lennart Meri, the first president of post-Soviet Estonia. He delivered a speech about Russia's imperial policy. Putin then demonstratively stood up and walked out of the hall right during Meri's speech. This episode is a favorite of Russian propaganda, first coined by a man named Vladimir Churov, to whom a brief digression is necessary. No one in Russia would have recognized this short, bearded man with a slightly comical appearance and speech if Putin hadn't...

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Quite unexpectedly, he did not appoint him head of the Central Election Commission (CEC). In this position, Churov so diligently served the interests of Putin and his supporters that his name became a byword in Russian. A "Churov result" is something anomalously large and deliberately fabricated, like the number of votes allegedly cast for Putin during Churov's tenure as head of the CEC. But few remember that seven years before his appointment to the CEC, Churov was one of the narrators in Putin's first biography, "First Person." The president then invited the authors to speak with several trusted people from St. Petersburg. Among them was, for example, Roldugin, Putin's figurehead. And Churov, also, in a sense, his figurehead. It was Churov who, in "First Person," recalls the episode of Putin refusing to listen to Mary's speech. "It was impressive," Churov praises the president. In the first half of the 1990s, he served as Putin's deputy in the mayor's office's committee for external relations. According to an eyewitness to those events,282 Churov was then responsible for the Baltic countries, St. Petersburg's close neighbors. In particular, he maintained contacts

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With members of the so-called "intermovements"—organizations in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania that advocated for the preservation of the USSR in the early 1990s, and later for autonomy for Russian-speakers. These "intermovements" were reasonably suspected of having ties to the KGB, and colleagues also suspected Churov of the same. So Putin's dislike of the Baltic states may be explained by his past in the KGB, or perhaps, again, by family experience that few remember. We need to once again recall Putin's father, Vladimir Spiridonovich. After serving in the navy in the 1930s, with the outbreak of World War II, he was mobilized into the active forces, or, more precisely, into a sabotage unit of the NKVD (this organization is the predecessor of the KGB and the FSB, so the Putins were something of a labor dynasty). At the beginning of the war, a small Soviet detachment, which included Putin Sr., was sent behind German lines, near the city of Kingisepp, right on the border with Estonia. The saboteurs seemed to have accomplished their mission—blowing up a German ammunition depot—but ran into trouble during their retreat. Putin's father and his fellow soldiers were betrayed to the Germans by local residents, the Es-

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The Soviet soldiers were forced to retreat quickly; of the nearly 30 soldiers, only four returned, including Putin Sr. To save himself, he, according to his son, had to hide in a swamp, breathing through a reed stalk. But there were countries that Putin loved, albeit in his own peculiar way. It would probably be true to say that he still loves them, but he pretends

to brand the entire West as an enemy. Probably the first among Putin's favorite places is France, its Atlantic Riviera, and the picturesque city of Biarritz. The Putin family began visiting here in the 1990s. In early July 1999, Putin was vacationing there, renting a room in an unremarkable hotel. A member of the "family," billionaire Boris Berezovsky, rushed to see him. On Yeltsin's orders, he wanted to find out whether Putin would agree to become his successor. He was then the director of the FSB and secretary of the Security Council—that is, the bearer of all possible state secrets of Russia, the head of its most powerful intelligence agency. All this did not prevent him from vacationing as a private citizen on the territory of a NATO country. However, when

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A year before, Putin was appointed head of the FSB; he had also barely returned from vacation, also in France (and Lyudmila remained at the resort and only learned of her husband's appointment there285). Time would pass, and President Putin would ban all employees of Russian security agencies from traveling to NATO member countries, and from vacationing outside of Russia without special reasons. Incidentally, there is another episode connected with France that vividly characterizes our hero. In 1996, the former speaker of the St. Petersburg parliament, Alexander Belyaev, publicly accused Putin of

funds of unclear origin are vacationing on the Atlantic coast of France (which is indeed the case). Putin, in response, also publicly blurted out that he "doesn't even know where" this coast is.286 Firstly, he was essentially lying, and secondly, in the heat of his justification, he simply said nonsense. Putin even tried to sue Belyaev, but by a strange coincidence, he indicated the wrong address for the defendant in the lawsuit, and ultimately there was no hearing. A journalist who covered the trial is certain that the deputy mayor, with his spy background, could not have failed to know the address of his political opponent, and therefore,

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He made a deliberate mistake to avoid testifying in court about his foreign travels. 287 So Putin not only loves France, but is also willing to lie absurdly and use petty cunning to conceal this fact. Putin, like any Russian, especially one who grew up in perpetually gloomy St. Petersburg,

has always been drawn to the south. The second place he loved in the 1990s was Spain. There, in the town of Torrevieja on the Mediterranean coast, the Twentieth Trust company established itself in the early 1990s. We mentioned it at the beginning of the book as a structure linked to Putin through corrupt ties. An investigation conducted but never completed by investigators in the 1990s revealed that Twentieth Trust was funneling money from the St. Petersburg budget to Spain. The money was used to build real estate in Torrevieja—villas and an apartment complex. Putin vacationed there. Later, the local press claimed that the future Russian president visited Spain in the 1990s at least

37 different 288.

Thirty-seven trips to Spain alone, and there were also France, Germany, and Finland

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And probably other countries, too. Putin certainly traveled considerably more frequently than ordinary Russians could afford in the 1990s. But overall, he was little different from his more or less well-off compatriots of the time. Under the Soviet Union, travel abroad was strictly regulated by the KGB (that is, Putin and his colleagues), but in the 1990s, the travel taboo fell, and Russians took advantage of it more and more. And what's more, travel! Putin's closest friends, his partners in sports and KGB service, acquired second passports and residence permits in other countries. Some of them were assisted in this bureaucratic process by Putin himself, using his connections in the FSB.

— for example, to his judo coach, Aron Bogolyubov. Arkady and Boris Rotenberg and their families settled in Germany and Finland (some members of this family still live there), Gennady Timchenko became a Finnish citizen, and Vladimir Smirnov, Putin's acquaintance from the days of Operation Resources for Food, settled in Berlin (his family still does business in European countries). In short, nothing about Putin then gave him away.

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and his entourage of people who harbor hatred and distrust towards the West, nothing betrayed and nostalg-
gies on the Soviet past.

Professor German Diligensky, the founder of Russian political science, wrote: “In 1998, only 10.5% of respondents named patriotism as their most important value. <…> This seemingly surprisingly low rating of patriotism does not indicate a lack of love for the Motherland, but rather an association of this term with ideas of militarism and mobilization in the name of restoring the empire, which are rejected by the majority of Russians.”290 Public opinion polls in the 1990s

confirm that anti-Western sentiments and imperialism did not take hold in the minds of citizens, even despite the economic trials of that time, which many associated with the capitalist model.

pouring economics.

In 2000, when Diligensky was writing these lines, Putin was giving an interview for his first biography, the book "First Person." There, he answered questions at length about relations with NATO and the outside world in general. In short, Putin said that Russia wouldn't be opposed to...

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cooperate with NATO and even, under certain conditions, join the organization. He also admitted that the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and East Germany was a grave mistake. Reading these words in 2025, they're hard to believe. A telling detail: as one of the book's authors, Natalia Gevorkyan, recalls, the NATO episode was the only one Putin wanted to edit before the book's publication, but ultimately, he left the quotes intact. In other words, even after thinking twice, Putin didn't change the tone of his favorable message to the West.

The end of this chapter is a unique opportunity to explore the subsequent fates of entire nations with whom Putin developed relationships early in his official career. Finland's romance with Putin's people was turbulent and long-lasting. Timchenko and the Rotenbergs eventually acquired numerous valuable assets there, from oil transshipments to sports facilities. Their prosperity in the country was ended by the first war in Ukraine in 2014. After the outbreak of major aggression in 2022, Finland quickly revised its neutrality.

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status and became a member of NATO, which had long included France and Spain.

Putin and his family's French romance was also protracted. Over time, Putin's daughter and her husband, Timchenko himself, settled in Biarritz, and Lyudmila Putina herself, who, as soon as she divorced her husband, used a convoluted scheme to obtain a house from him there, on the Atlantic coast. Putin placed his new woman, Alina Kabaeva, on Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, the French coast on the Mediterranean. There, the gymnast used a luxurious villa once inhabited by Zairean dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. Ironically, before Kabaeva, the villa was inhabited by the same Shalva Chigirinsky, who in the 1990s

x laughed at Putin's plebeian style292.

As for Spain, Putin's charm wore off somewhat earlier. Since 2007, the country has seen several large-scale police operations against Russian mafiosi and corrupt politicians. Many of Putin's friends and colleagues from the 1990s, although they didn't end up in Spanish prison, lost their safe haven in that country. Many Spanish investigations

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Putin's name figured prominently in the documents. This, again, did not lead to legal consequences for him, but it did set an important linguistic precedent. One of the case files contained wiretaps from gangsters acquainted with Putin, in which they referred to the Russian president by the simple word "tsar," which accurately reflected Russian reality.

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3. Mr. Olympia

When Putin learned to live at someone else's expense

"Little children, little troubles," goes an old Russian proverb. The implication is that children grow up with their own problems. The same is true of the new Russian state, born in 1991. What seemed like a major national problem in the 1990s now looks like child's play. There are many examples of this, but here we're talking about corruption. It's no exaggeration to say that what Russians considered corruption in the 1990s now evokes only a bitter smirk. And Vladimir Putin has a direct hand in this metamorphosis.

When the Prosecutor General's Office and State Duma deputies investigated corruption in Boris Yeltsin's inner circle in 1998–1999, they discovered that credit cards had been issued in the names of relatives of the then-president, the balances of which were covered by businessmen connected to the "family," in particular, the same Swiss builder Behgjet Pacolli, who received a generous contract to renovate the Kremlin. As you may recall, Putin

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He began his rise to the Russian throne precisely by suppressing that investigation at the prenatal stage. But now one detail is important: the annual expenses of Yeltsin's daughter, Tatyana Dyachenko, were then estimated at $200,000–$300,000. If that were true, then it was undoubtedly corruption. But what is embezzlement of even $200,000 by today's Russian standards? It's less than a mathematical error.

Yevgeny Savostyanov, who oversaw personnel work in the presidential administration in the second half of the 1990s, recalls reading Vladimir Putin's personnel file when he was appointed head of the Kremlin's control department in 1997. "There was nothing remarkable there, no particular wealth. All this, apparently, will begin later," he says.295 " All this"—that is, the corruption of large numbers —began as soon as Putin took office as president. Literally immediately. His first inauguration took place

on May 7, 2000. It was a pompous event, both in its scenario and atmosphere, very different from what had happened under Boris Yeltsin. To protect his health

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Yeltsin's 1996 inauguration organizers pared the program down to the bare minimum. But in 2000, everything looked royal. Firstly, the venue was moved to the ancient Grand Kremlin Palace (Yeltsin was sworn in at the Soviet Palace of Congresses), and secondly, the program included all the ceremonial elements—

The motorcade passes, fireworks, an orchestra, and the march of the Kremlin Regiment. While the ailing Yeltsin managed to deliver a speech in 1996 that lasted less than a minute, Putin spoke noticeably longer. "For the first time in the history of our state, supreme power is being transferred in the most democratic, the simplest way—by the will of the people, legally and peacefully," Putin said, as if Yeltsin's "family" hadn't secretly decided to make him their successor, which forced the young FSB director to urgently fly from Biarritz to Moscow. "I can assure you that my actions will be guided solely by the interests of the state. It may be impossible to avoid mistakes, but what I can promise and do promise is that I will work openly and honestly," Putin assured. This phrase is important to us, and every assertion in it will be refuted by reality.

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Already at the time of his inauguration, President Putin was preoccupied with more than just state interests. He began to build his own

royal life, while simultaneously playing a comedy in front of the voters.

At the beginning of Putin's first term, Russians were particularly disliked by the rich, and especially the super-rich: they were collectively and completely

They were quite rightly called "oligarchs"—that is, people whose wealth gave them power over others. This refers to the businessmen who received state assets during Yeltsin's privatization of the mid-1990s. And there was reason to dislike the oligarchs: they did indeed often interfere in politics,

minimized taxes and saved on social

expenses, after all, in the eyes of the popula-

were responsible for considerable economic losses.

the suffering of ordinary Russians in the 1990s. In short, the oligarchs were a perfect target for the young president looking to score political points. But Putin also had personal gain in mind: by frightening the oligarchs, they could be forced

pay.

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Vladimir Gusinsky was the first to fall under Putin's attack. Among other things, this media mogul owned the wildly popular NTV television channel, which took an anti-Putin stance (not only because his employees sincerely believed it, but also because Gusinsky supported politicians who opposed the "family"). Just three days after Putin's inauguration, Gusinsky was already facing problems. Early in the morning of May 11, investigators would conduct searches of his companies' offices. Over the next two and a half months, the oligarch would live a life reminiscent of a fast-forward thriller: Gusinsky would be arrested, spend a short time in prison, sign documents dissolving his own business, and emigrate, where he currently lives.

It was a signal frightening enough to make the other oligarchs nervous. On July 28, 2000, all of Russia's largest entrepreneurs (with two very important exceptions, discussed below) came to the Kremlin for a meeting with Putin—they wanted at least some guarantees of security for themselves and their businesses. What happened behind closed doors, the public did not know.

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learned. Leaving the meeting, the oligarchs demonstrated cautious optimism. Judging by their words, the president promised them impartiality and guaranteed the inviolability of private property and the results of privatization. But the oligarchs "must also behave better," as Vladimir Potanin, Russia's nickel king and both the organizer of the "Yeltsin privatization" (as First Deputy Prime Minister) and its beneficiary (as the recipient of shares in Norilsk Nickel, the largest nickel-palladium plant in the world), put it. It should be remembered that Potanin had more reason to worry than the other Putin guests at the time. The prosecutor's office and the Accounts Chamber were conducting an audit of the privatization of Norilsk Nickel, and the case even went to court, but the meeting with Putin reassured Potanin. What does "behave better" mean, he doesn't

explained, but other participants in the meeting said something interesting. First, Putin *asked* the rich to chip in money for a fund to support the special services, to which those gathered readily agreed, ultimately amounting to "several tens of millions of dollars"298 (and why wouldn't they agree, if the alternative

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(Are audits by the Accounts Chamber and the Prosecutor's Office being proposed?). Secondly, at least one of the businessmen who attended was criticized by Putin. The President approached Sibneft CEO Evgeny Shvidler: "Why does Sibneft pay so little in taxes?" Shvidler allegedly replied that Putin's figures were incorrect, and Putin promised to double-check. Shvidler must have gotten scared, although he was a completely accidental victim in this story. His boss, Roman Abramovich, a member of Yeltsin's "family" and, so to speak, a true oligarch, didn't show up for the meeting. We don't know exactly what was going on between Putin and Abramovich in those days. Perhaps Putin really did threaten the oligarch with tax claims. Or perhaps the scene with Shvidler was just theater, not a scene, but a skit. A decade later, a London court will hear a case between oligarchs from 2000—Roman Abramovich and Boris Berezovsky. The former was on friendly terms with Putin and prosperous at the time of the trial. And the latter—like Abramovich, he failed to attend the Kremlin meeting in the summer of 2000—

was forced to flee Russia and lived in poverty

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(Berezovsky's fate will be discussed in the final part of the book). Under oath, Berezovsky testified that back in the fall of 1999, Abramovich offered Putin a yacht worth fifty million dollars as a gift. Whatever the precise moment, Roman Abramovich delivered on his promise to Putin regarding the yacht. Construction of the luxurious, 57-meter ocean-going yacht began in Holland. In 2002, the snow-white vessel, with the inscription "Olympia" on its stern, moored in Sochi, where Putin maintains his summer residence.

It was a major milestone in his life, Putin's first (but not last) yacht, or "boat" as it is called.
Russian officials and businessmen condescendingly call their expensive vessels. Now the details of the yacht's story seem cinematically ridiculous—if the Coen brothers were making a movie about corruption, they would be interested. The $50 million yacht was moored in Sochi, not far from Putin's state dacha. 301 According to the documents, the "boat" belonged to the company of that same Evgeny Shvidler, whom Putin gave a dressing-down as soon as he came to power. But if the yacht was private, why did the Kremlin immediately put the president on it?

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security? Why did the government-affiliated newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda immediately write honestly: "The president has a new yacht, the Olympia"?302 It's as if the authorities themselves have given themselves away. It seems that no one—neither in the Kremlin nor in the media—
I hadn't encountered examples of such large-scale and brazen corruption back then. Over the years, anything related to Putin's property would become taboo, but in 2002, no one could have imagined the Russian president accepting yachts as bribes. The Olympia would later be transferred to the balance sheet of the state-owned company Sovcomflot, thus completing its transfer from the oligarch's hands to the country's leader's. History would finally become fact when, years later, Sovcomflot CEO Dmitry Skarga fled to the UK and personally confirmed (including to the authors of this book) that Abramovich had given Putin the yacht.

Of course, Abramovich wasn't the only oligarch who accepted the new rules of the game proposed by Putin. In fact, most Russian billionaires, bold in their fight for

their assets, turned out to be obedient schoolchildren when it came to sorting things out

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with the Kremlin. In the first year of Putin's presidency, another event occurred, which is clearly shown
calling.

The company "Petromed" has existed since the early 1990s, tracing its roots back to St. Petersburg. At the time, Vladimir Putin, a young city hall official, was directly involved with the company—the company was created to supply city hospitals with foreign equipment, which was then in short supply. For a time, the mayor's office even owned a significant stake in Petromed, but by the beginning of the 21st century, the company had only two shareholders: Sergei Kolesnikov (a biophysicist) and Dmitry Gorelov (an acquaintance of Putin's from the St. Petersburg mayor's office, a former KGB officer). These two had a friend and partner, Nikolai Shamalov, whom we mentioned many times in the early parts of this book. Shamalov, a close friend of Putin's from the "Ozero" cooperative, began his career as a dentist, and since the 1990s, he has worked as a representative of the German company Siemens in Russia, a position that brought him into close contact with both Petromed and the authorities. In 2000, the three met to discuss a new plan. Shamalov proposed to the shareholders

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Petromed's prospects were enticing: the company would be able to modernize hospitals not only in St. Petersburg but nationwide. Shamalov assured them there would be no problem with financing, as Russia's leading businessmen would make generous charitable contributions to Petromed, amounting to millions of dollars. There was only one small condition, which at the time seemed insignificant to Petromed's shareholders: the company had to transfer 35% of its profits from projects to bank accounts, opened, for some reason, not in Russia, but in Switzerland. This was necessary to create a fund that would later invest the money in Russian high-tech manufacturing, Shamalov explained, and everyone calmed down. The shareholders' confidence was further enhanced by the fact that, according to Shamalov (and he was hardly joking), the idea itself originated with President Putin. And the scheme soon took off. Abramovich himself contributed $203 million. Steel oligarch Alexei Mordashov

almost 15 million. Both businessmen told Kolesnikov that Putin personally asked them to contribute. There were probably other donors, too.

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Because over the six or seven years this scheme operated, at least half a billion dollars accumulated in a foreign account linked to Petromed.304 Moreover, at some point, the Russian state also began providing money to Petromed. The budget ordered Gorelov and Kolesnikov's firm to purchase foreign CT scanners, but the key rule remained the same: 35% of the profit earned by Petromed (the profit primarily came from the difference between the purchase price and the final price) was deposited into the foreign account.305

Soon, Petromed shareholders began to notice oddities. The money transferred to the Swiss account wasn't so much invested in Russian innovations as spent on suspicious transactions. For example, one of the first things they used was to buy up shares in Bank Rossiya. Then, the same money was used to buy up various valuable assets from state-owned Gazprom—the insurance company Sogaz, the pension savings operator Gazfond, and so on (we'll discuss these transactions in more detail later). All of these assets went to people in Putin's orbit.

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circle - Yuri Kovalchuk, Nikolai Shamalov and others, or were registered in the names of the president's relatives, for example, Mikhail Shelomov, Putin's nephew, who became a major shareholder in Sogaz (we'll talk about him too). Petromed's finest hour would come later, when, with the help of his money, Putin would reach another important milestone in his prosperity - following the yacht, he would also get his own palace. We will continue this story in the next chapter, but for now we will document the new reality that arose on July 28, 2000, when Putin had a closed-door conversation

didoval with the oligarchs.

This is the most important date of the Putin era - it established a new status quo in the relations between the president (and his entourage) and Russia's wealthy. The rules were as follows: a) oligarchs are left alone as long as they pay and stay out of politics; b) those who do not agree are harshly punished - following Vladimir Gusinsky, Boris Berezovsky, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and later many others will fall into disgrace. Putin, although he verbally guaranteed the businessmen the inviolability of the results of "Yeltsin's privatization," simultaneously launched the "privatization"

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tions 2.0”, which we talked about a lot at the beginning of the book. The stolen property of the unruly oligarchs-
Khov immediately went to people in Putin's circle, to those who were loyal to him (the remnants of Gusinsky's empire went to Kovalchuk, he and Abramovich will get Berezovsky's former assets, Sechin and Timchenko will profit from Khodorkovsky's defeat).

The new reality Putin created in the summer of 2000 is best described by two quotes, each in its own way. Karen Dawisha, a leading researcher of Putin's corruption, described the results of the July 28 meeting in scholarly language: "According to the

"According to Putin's plan, the state will be strengthened not by breaking the oligarchic system itself, but by turning the oligarchs <…> into a corporation that serves the pleasures of state employees."306 The author of the second quote is the then billionaire Kakha Bendukidze. After the closed-door meeting, he was the only one of those gathered who did not look optimistic. After listening to his fellow oligarchs praise Putin, he said: "Well, I don't know, maybe I was at some other meeting..."307

Bendukidze turned out to be right: Putin once again pretended to be someone he was not. Promising fairness

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With his generosity, he forced the oligarchs to pay for his luxurious lifestyle and populist promises.

Bendukidze will soon get rid of his business in Russia and move to his first homeland -
to Georgia. There he would engage in political and social work. He would die in 2014.

It's ironic, but the events of 2000 even left their mark on the Russian language. Since the beginning of Putin's rule, the slang expression "homework" has become increasingly common. It could be said to be a key term in the economic model built under Putin. Of course, "homework" has nothing to do with math or biology lessons. Officials and businessmen began using this term to describe shadow payments (in cash, in kind, in shares, or any other form) to Putin or his entourage. The authors of this book heard this term from dozens of major businessmen with whom they spoke during their careers. Naturally, "homework" quickly became a widespread practice. Regional leaders began issuing "assignments" to local entrepreneurs, and so on down the bureaucratic chain.

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The ladder was defined by the position's privileges. The overwhelming majority of Russian businessmen turned out to be as obedient schoolchildren as the top-tier oligarchs at the Kremlin meeting. Cases where entrepreneurs refused to submit to government pressure and publicly denounced Putin and his entourage can be counted on one hand. The benefits of working in the growing Russian market always outweighed morality.

and right.

Don't part with your loved ones. After the Olympia, Putin acquired other yachts, more modern ones, but his first "boat" is forever. Members of the Russian president's family, including the young sons born to him by Alina Kabaeva, used the Olympia until very recently. Until the fall of 2021, the vessel sailed between Sochi and Crimea, then was sent to a Dutch dock for repairs. By the end of that year, she returned to Russia; radar last detected the "boat" in Lake Ladoga, again near one of the country residences associated with Putin. With the outbreak of the large-scale war in Ukraine

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Olympia has fallen under international sanctions, and therefore will not leave Putin as long as he remains president – that is, until the end of his life.

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4. A national-scale carrier

How Putin Prepared for Retirement

The Moskva Hotel, which stood in the very center of the Russian capital, right next to the Kremlin, until 2004, was one of the symbols of the Soviet Union. Everything about it was unusual and surrounded by legends. The architectural style of this large-scale

The buildings are difficult to describe—a mixture of Stalinist Empire style and constructivism, with differences even within the same façade. This gave rise to the legend that the architects misinterpreted the instructions of Comrade Stalin, under whom the gigantic construction began. Another legend about the Moskva is that all the rooms in this hotel were bugged by the KGB. Like the story about Stalin, this is probably not entirely fictitious. For years, the Moskva accommodated guests of the Soviet Union, ordinary tourists...

of influential foreigners—of course, many of them were under surveillance by the secret services. In 1942, the classic of Belarusian national poetry, Yanka Kupala (Ivan Lutsevich), died in the hotel under mysterious circumstances—he either fell or

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He was thrown down the stairs by NKVD agents. In the second half of the 20th century, Moskva became known worldwide, even to those who had never visited the Soviet Union. In 1972, during a brief thaw in relations between the USSR and the United States, the Kremlin ceded the global distribution rights to Stolichnaya vodka to the American corporation PepsiCo, introducing the Soviet people to the taste of Pepsi soda. Since then, every foreigner who ordered *a Stoli* at the bar knew what a Moskva looked like: its image still adorns the Stolichnaya label.

Most legends come to an end. The Moskva Hotel was demolished in 2004 to make way for the Four Seasons Hotel, which resembled the historic building in its outline. It's hard to say now how justified the hotel's demolition was. Developer Shalva Chigirinsky recalls that if you put your ear to the wall of the old hotel, you could hear the sand crumbling inside the structure. "The Stalinist moisture came out of the concrete," he jokes.309 Ultimately, he convinced the Moscow mayor's office, which managed the hotel, to begin reconstruction. The businessman is apparently being disingenuous when he says he intended to

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To become simply a "project manager." Chigirinsky had very close ties to the Moscow mayor's office at the time, which allowed him to secure numerous lucrative construction contracts. Presumably, he had similar designs on "Moscow." But soon, everything went awry. Putin's "bandit" friends, judokas Konstantin Goloshchapov and Arkady Rotenberg, became harbingers of trouble. Chigirinsky met with them at the turn of 2003-2004 and recalls these meetings with a grin: the interlocutors "never once said what exactly they wanted," "Goloshchapov constantly crossed himself," and Rotenberg finally said, "I don't need money, I just want to build a beautiful facility," implying that he was laying claim to "Moscow." "I knew that Putin was behind Rotenberg. "And I would have contacted him... But they didn't need me for this project," the businessman jokes, talking to us years later. As a result, Chigirinsky lost the "Moscow", and the mayor's office signed a construction contract with a company whose owners were hidden in offshore companies. It would later turn out310 that three people were hiding behind the offshore companies - Arkady Rotenberg, Konstantin Goloshchapov, and also mentioned

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Moscow banker Ashot Egiazaryan, who appeared at the beginning of this book (he took part in the story of discrediting Prosecutor General Skuratov).

The way Rotenberg took over the reconstruction project of the Moscow Hotel, he, with varying degrees of success, Home has done this repeatedly and in completely different sectors of the economy.

In 2003, when the Moskva affair was unfolding, passions were also running high, far from the center of the capital, where the country's most famous distillery, Kristall, is located. The distillery, which had once bottled that same Stolichnaya, had now begun producing a new vodka with a strong image. It was called Pu-

"Putinka" was relatively inexpensive and became the best-selling vodka in Russia in the mid-2000s. The label featured the president's name, then unquestionably popular, which was the producer's justified expectation. For many years, it was believed that the name "Putinka" was its only connection to the president. However, in 2023, a journalistic investigation, in which the authors of this book participated,311 proved that Putin himself secretly owned a stake in the "Putinka" brand, in which

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production and sales. And it was none other than Rotenberg who did this for the president. It happened like this. The creators of "Putinka," having just come up with a new brand, decided to coordinate the use of the state name. They approached Rotenberg, who in the early 2000s was whispered about by Moscow business circles as a man capable of resolving issues with the president. Rotenberg settled this issue as well, for which he received a share in "Putinka." Rotenberg then went on to capture the majority of the Russian alcoholic beverage market—brands, alcohol production,

beverage trade, while also acquiring the site of the very same Kristall plant in an expensive Moscow suburb for development. A significant portion of the income from all these businesses went into the accounts of the offshore company Ermira (registered in Cyprus), opened in 2003. One might think that Rotenberg had acquired all this for himself and that it was his funds that were accumulating in foreign accounts. But this was not the case, as we proved in 2023. Thanks to the testimony of...

Based on the information from a related source and the documents they provided, we were able to verify that the Ermira company was secretly owned by the president (it

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and was registered to Vladislav Kopylov, Putin's classmate, that is, to yet another figurehead). If Sovex, which we wrote about above, was likely Putin's first company in Russia, then Ermira is possibly the first personal offshore in the Russian president's life. Over the years, Ermira accumulated enormous sums of money. Estimates show that the production of Putinka alone could have earned at least half a billion dollars. And the company profited from numerous other sources. However, vodka is certainly Putin's most extravagant source of income. The spirits trade has always been considered a royal enterprise in Russia, in the sense that the income from it went to the state treasury, but the new Russian tsar took this tradition too literally—he made vodka his personal property. As the country's president, Putin was supposed to fight drunkenness, an eternal Russian problem, but as the owner of an alcohol business, for example, he once lowered the minimum selling price of vodka, which caused a surge in the consumption of drinks like "Pu-

"teens".

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Ermira, Petromed, and a number of other firms are companies that journalists have dubbed "Putin's wallets." They have two things in common. First, they all kept the president's money abroad, not in Russia. Second, they themselves didn't conduct any specific business activities. Essentially, these companies managed...

They used Putin's pension savings. From time to time, the funds from these accounts were spent on the personal expenses of Putin and his family, occasionally invested in projects he favored, but the main thing that happened to the money was that *it lay dormant, awaiting better times.* During his first two presidential terms, Putin was a national-scale thief who planned to retire someday and enjoy his stolen wealth.

He even began preparing a place for these pleasures. The Black Sea coast of the Krasnodar Territory is the only region of Russia with a subtropical climate. Both ordinary citizens and the elite enjoy vacationing here. Since Soviet times, the Sochi region has been home to the residences of state leaders. At the beginning of this century,

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Putin had two houses in Sochi: a state dacha in the city itself and the official summer residence, Bocharov Ruchey, in the northern part of the resort. Not far from the first of these dachas (now called Riviera-6), the yacht Olympia, a gift to the head of state, was moored in 2002. Over time, Putin became better at concealing his activities. In 2005, north of Sochi, in the pristine coastal forests of Cape Idokopas, construction began on another house for Putin, which became both his most expensive and most ill-fated home. Blasphemous, but accurate, it would be

Comparing this Putin palace to some medieval churches—they were built for years, decades, centuries, and still couldn't be finished. In 2023, when we were writing this book, the palace was supposedly completed after yet another renovation. But Putin still finds it difficult to use—the multi-year construction near Gelendzhik has attracted so much attention from journalists, politicians, environmentalists, and local residents that it's practically impossible to do anything there unnoticed. Moreover, Putin has made such brazen attempts to conceal his connection to the palace that

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found himself in a rather stupid situation, which can be described by a twisted proverb, "to recognize is not to use." For years, the authorities tried to pretend that the palace, with an area of over 17 thousand

Square meters belong to anyone but Putin, and it's not a palace, just a luxury hotel. To maintain secrecy, the grounds and buildings were registered to offshore companies, the families of Putin's bodyguards, and oligarchs connected to the president. The latest in this line was, once again, Arkady Rotenberg. In the winter of 2021, he came out publicly and said: "Now it will no longer be a secret that I am a beneficiary... This is a godsend, a magnificent place... The place is absolutely conducive to turning it into a hotel." It seemed incredibly ridiculous, but Putin was clearly in no mood for jokes at the time. Just days before Rotenberg's statement, Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny published a video investigation of the palace online, revealing its interior for the first time. From what they saw, it was clear to everyone that the huge building, the underground hockey stadium, the vast vineyards and the section of the sea closed to outsiders belonged to

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One man, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. Navalny's investigation was watched by millions of Russians, and the president was forced to salvage the situation, turning to an old friend from filmmaking. But not only did Rotenberg's performance fall flat—in the end, the authors of this book obtained updated plans and interior footage of the "hotel."313 As of 2023, it was still the same palace, worth nearly a billion dollars, for one person, and a man with a noticeably damaged psyche at that (we'll discuss the connection between the palace and its occupant's character later).

The funds for the palace's construction came from the same Petromed company, or rather, from a foreign account linked to it. But not only from there. At some point, money for Putin's residence began to be spent directly from the state budget (as already mentioned, money from the treasury also began to be pumped into Petromed). This episode deserves a separate story. As we wrote, Petromed's shareholders began to notice something was wrong quite quickly. Not only was the money being withdrawn...

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funds sent abroad were spent on buying up assets, and not on venture capital investments, as Putin promised,
The Russian president acted as the real owner of this money. In particular, his friend Nikolai Shamalov regularly (two or three times a year) submitted account status reports to the president. Then came "Project South"—that's what they called the construction project begun at Cape Idokopas within Petromed. At some point, all other projects vanished into thin air, and the only thing Petromed, once created to develop Russian hospitals, was left with was the royal palace. Funds for construction became critically short in 2008, when the global economic recession began. Russia suffered greatly from that crisis: banks collapsed, the national currency fluctuated, the government frantically rescued entire sectors of the economy—but Putin didn't care. He was building his own house. It was from 2008 that Petromed was ordered not to spend money on anything other than the palace. The entire school was already on fire, and the teacher kept giving the students homework. After some time, the palace began to demand money for its upkeep—and it was precisely

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state-owned companies (primarily Transneft) began chipping in for this, as if this were not the president’s personal home, but a national project.

of no particular significance.

Now our story about the palace seems light and casual. However, this is an illusion -
A web of lies and deception was woven around it during Putin's years in power. A network of dozens of offshore companies, managed by nearly all of Putin's friends and nominees, helped conceal the ownership and construction of this property. At the center of this network stands the company "Binom"—its very name seems to hint at the difficulty of uncovering the truth. The palace was even physically protected from outside attention: a no-fly zone was established over it, and the sea along the coast was turned into a restricted area. Everything we now know about the palace is the result of the colossal efforts of journalists, activists, and politicians, many of whom paid dearly for their interest in the president's wealth. Alexei Navalny, whose team published the most comprehensive investigation into Putin's palace in 2021,

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He died in prison, where he was wrongfully imprisoned by Russian authorities. The authors of this book lost their jobs at Russia's largest private media holding, RBC, in 2016 after they published a story claiming that one of Putin's friends had opened an oyster farm near the palace (most likely, there were no oyster fields at all, and the whole story about the farm was used to conceal part of the coastline near Gelendzhik from prying eyes).

Putin's Palace near Gelendzhik Anti-Corruption Foundation

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But the multi-year palace investigation was initiated by one specific individual. This was Sergei Kolesnikov, the Petromed shareholder who manages Putin's "wallet." Although the authors of this book spoke with Kolesnikov on numerous occasions, we have only seen his face through Skype conversations. Fearing for his life, Kolesnikov left Russia in 2010 and, from abroad, published an open letter to then-President Dmitry Medvedev. In it, he spoke for the first time about the construction project in Gelendzhik and the multi-million dollar donations from oligarchs to Petromed's foreign account. Kolesnikov, as he himself has repeatedly stated, was for a time a staunch supporter of President Putin, but at some point he realized he was participating in his personal, illegal enrichment.

Among other evidence presented by Kolesnikov were unique audio recordings -
They were secretly made by the shareholder of Petromed himself during conversations with Shamalov (the authenticity of the recordings was not disputed by anyone, so we assume that they are genuine). Among these recordings, there is one that gives a comprehensive idea

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statement about how Putin’s “wallets” are structured315:

Kolesnikov: *What kind of money was in Rollins* (one of the foreign companies used to withdraw money – author’s note) ?

Shamalov: *And these ones, which are listed-*

lazy…

Kolesnikov: *Ours? Or Mikhail Ivanovich's?*

Shamalov: *Mikhail Ivanovich... Mikhail Ivanovich's money - that's what's known...*

Kolesnikov: *Mikhail Ivanovich's money - 439 million 968 thousand* (dollars – author’s note)… *This is Mikhail Ivanovich’s money…*

Who is this Mikhail Ivanovich, aka Mikhal Ivanovich? This is Putin's code name, which was used not only within Petromed—many Russian politicians and businessmen used it to refer to the president (this was confirmed by Kolesnikov and our other interlocutors). We will talk more about the phenomenon of "code names" in Russia later, but for now, let's note one detail. The name Mikhail Ivanovich

Novich most likely refers to the mysterious character of the most famous Soviet film comedy

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dii - "The Diamond Arm." This Mikhail Ivanovich is an officer of either the police or the KGB, who tracks down smugglers carrying jewelry across the border. In reality, it turned out that "Mikhail Ivanovich" Putin isn't fighting the flow of money out of Russia; on the contrary, he's smuggling it out of the country in huge quantities. The palace financing scheme involved companies registered in Liechtenstein, Belize, Panama, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the British Virgin Islands, as well as bank accounts in Zurich and London. This gives an idea of Putin's attitude toward the concept of patriotism. He also treats the concept of modesty with the utmost hypocrisy. When Navalny rocked the Russian internet in 2021 with an investigation into the luxury of Putin's palace, the president was forced to resort to a very funny trick. Putin not only asked Rotenberg to pretend to be the true owner of the property in Gelendzhik, but also refuted Navalny's claims. The refutation was not a word of truth, but what's important is that the Kremlin tried to produce a video that would highlight the president's asceticism. For this occasion, Putin specially

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He officially arrived at his most unpretentious and least visited state residence—Zavidovo in the Tver region. The formal purpose of the trip was to communicate with students;

It was, admittedly, conducted via video link, so there was no logic to the business trip to Zavidovo. But the Kremlin managed to create a very modest television image: Putin sitting in a dreary, shabby interior, with a nondescript tulle window covering and cheap double-glazed windows. The most expensive item in the video was the Blancpain chronograph on the president's right hand. He is very fond of this prestigious brand—at least twice during his career, he has given such watches to random people in front of television cameras: a mechanic in Tula and a shepherd in Tyva. Hypocrisy always goes hand in hand with populism. Journalists over the years have examined the...

The president's wristwatches include watches from at least six luxury brands—Blancpain, IWC, Breguet, Patek Philippe, FPJourne, and Lange & Sohne. If we take the low end of these models into account, it would mean Putin spent at least 22 million rubles on them. Considering that Putin's official salary in recent years

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amounts to about nine and a half million a year, he can certainly afford sewing-
royal watches, but he must spend a significant part of his earnings on them.

As Kolesnikov once said, he hoped that President Medvedev, after reading his letter, would "prove himself"—that is, apparently, punish then-Prime Minister Putin for corruption. "After all, Dmitry Anatolyevich says wonderful, beautiful, and correct things," Kolesnikov argued.

He's far from the only person who saw in Medvedev (wrongly, as we now understand) a chance for a different path for Russia's development. Perhaps even Putin himself saw something similar in Medvedev at times—and feared force majeure. If you study Putin's corruption year after year, as we have, you can discover an interesting pattern. The peak of corruption occurred at the end of his second presidential term, in 2007–

2008. Above, we called this time “the period of first uncertainty” - Putin’s nobles, and up to a certain point, apparently, the president himself, did not know what the future had in store for them. The rest

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Is Putin staying in office by some trick, and if he leaves, where will he go and for how long? We've already reported that at some point he came up with a plan that suited him—to give way to the charismatic Dmitry Medvedev, and to become prime minister himself four years later.

Run for president again. The plan was foolproof, but not 100 percent certain. "Putin understood perfectly well that the powers of the president in Russia were so vast, even excessive, that Medvedev, if he so desired, would have no trouble remaining for a second, third, or even fourth term," recalls a good acquaintance of Medvedev's from those years.317 Like a prudent money-grubber, Putin had to insure himself financially.

We will now list the main assets "carried away" by President Putin from his post in 2006–2008. Along with him and with his help, his closest confidants "carried away"—they were especially unaware of what their future would be like if their patron ceased to be president. The examples provided clearly show what exactly these people "carried away": they stole parts of Gazprom, at that time the largest gas producer.

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The world's most powerful company. Putin has a complete fixation on this company. In 1999, even before becoming Yeltsin's successor, he, according to those involved, dreamed of heading Gazprom.318 Even after becoming president, Putin didn't lose his obsession with gas. As soon as he came to power, he replaced the chairman of the board of directors of this state corporation, appointing Dmitry Medvedev, then a young, relatively unknown former Putin subordinate from St. Petersburg. A year later, Putin appointed another former subordinate, Alexei Miller, as CEO of Gazprom, a man as indifferent and weak-willed as Medvedev. Over the following years, Putin's people—either KGB colleagues, colleagues from St. Petersburg, or relatives and friends—occupied most of the company's management positions. The apotheosis of this personnel policy was the appointment of Mikhail Putin, the president's second cousin, as Deputy Chairman of the Management Board of Gazprom. This Putin had never previously worked in the energy sector; he worked as a psychiatrist and addiction specialist in the city of Ivanovo, which only reinforces the metaphor of Putin's unhealthy fixation on Gazprom.

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It might have seemed that Putin, from his first day in the Kremlin, was filling Gazprom with his protégés to better oversee one of Russia's largest enterprises, which accounted for a very large portion of the budget. But in reality, this was merely a prelude to a more significant move. By the end of Putin's second term, Gazprom, with the consent of its management, began to be rapidly dismantled.

Sogaz Insurance Group. 2004–2007. Initially, it was a company created by Gazprom to insure its employees. Under Putin, Gazprom decided to get rid of what was then considered an unpromising asset (although, it would seem, the Russian insurance market was beginning to grow rapidly at that time). In 2004, Sogaz's shareholders turned out to be companies associated with Putin's friend Yuri Kovalchuk, the president's nephew Mikhail Shelomov, and other people affiliated with the head of state in one way or another. In the following years, Sogaz began to expand, absorbing other formerly state assets. Ultimately, it made its shareholders billionaires, although it's not hard to guess.

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That at the very least, Shelomov isn't the real owner of the shares. This relative of the president is one of the most comical characters in our book. When Putin became president, Shelomov worked as a photographer in a photo studio (his education as an optical engineer helped). Putin remembered his poor relative...

Putin's nephew didn't get a job right away - to begin with, he was assigned as a "manager for various issues" at the very same Sovcomflot company that managed Putin's first ocean-going yacht. As an acquaintance of Shelomov recalled in one of our investigations, Putin's nephew didn't have much to do, and was assigned to photograph ships for brochures.319 After such an uncomplicated career, Shelomov suddenly became the owner of Sogaz shares worth several million dollars. However, don't be fooled: Shelomov, although related to Putin, is in fact nothing more than a figurehead, as much of a fake businessman as many of the others mentioned above. In a village in the Tver region, where Shelomov is from, he still has a rickety rural house, where he recently visited on weekends. Attached to the house is a village outhouse, also rickety, with a large

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a crack in the door, knocked together from planks by hand by a fake billionaire from Sogaz.

"Project"

Gazfond, Gazprombank, Gazprom-Media. 2006–2007.

Gazprom's pension fund, one of Russia's largest banks, and the media giant also proved of no use to the state. They were gradually acquired by people like Yuri Kovalchuk and the same Shelomov. Even Svetlana Krivonogikh, now Putin's former mistress, received a small stake in these assets.

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The petrochemical giant Sibur (produces industrial chemicals). 2007–2008. At one point in the early 2000s, Gazprom fought for this promising asset. And successfully. But in 2007, for no apparent reason, 75% of Sibur was transferred from Gazprom's balance sheet to Gazprombank, and the remaining 25% a year later was transferred to Gazfond. Both companies were no longer state-owned at the time.

They were controlled by Bank Rossiya through a chain of legal entities. However, Kovalchuk's petrochemical holdings didn't last long—they were soon divided among other private players, including Putin's friend Gennady Timchenko and the president's son-in-law, Kirill Shamalov.

Stroytransgaz. December 2007. Stroytransgaz was once the construction division of Gazprom. In the 1990s, a number of assets of this sub-
The division ended up in private hands—they went to the families of the then-managers of the gas monopoly. With Putin's arrival, these enterprises were supposedly returned to Gazprom, but by the end of his second presidential term, the state suddenly lost interest in them.

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Putin's friend Gennady Timchenko became the owner of Transgaz. This asset significantly increased his fortune, because Gazprom, having ceded the construction business to Timchenko, immediately began to give him
huge government orders - for laying gas pipelines and similar projects.

Stroygazmontazh. Early 2008. This is another major construction contractor for Gazprom. Toward the end of Putin's second term, Gazprom decided to divest a whole group of its "non-core assets"—its regional construction divisions. They were all acquired and then merged into Stroygazmontazh by Putin's friend, the "bandit" Arkady Rotenberg. The deal was completed just in time for the inauguration of interim President Dmitry Medvedev in May 2008.

Yamal LNG (one of the largest liquefied natural gas producers in the world). 2008–2009. This is perhaps the most brazen scheme of all those described here. Yamal LNG, currently producing gas in Russia's Far North, owes its success to the reserves of the South Tambey gas condensate field. Its enormous potential has long been known, even under Putin.

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Gazprom began to fight for the field. In 2006, it seemed close to a final victory.

The rights to Yuzhno-Tambeyskoye ended up in the hands of Gazprombank (which, admittedly, was itself just then leaking out of Gazprom). But the state ultimately never saw this asset. In 2008—again, before Medvedev's arrival—a significant share of the asset went to the same Gennady Timchenko. However, a little later, Timchenko and Putin pulled off an even more brazen deal, which helped the Russian tsar increase his pension contribution by $450 million in just a few months. In 2009, Gazprombank sold its remaining 25% stake in Yamal LNG to an unknown businessman, Pyotr Kolbin. You probably don't even remember that we mentioned this name once before, deliberately spelling it in lowercase.

like the name of some kind of medical drug. Pyotr Kolbin is the president's figurehead, a former butcher, a heavy drinker whose only merit was being acquainted with Putin since childhood. In the 1960s, they would cause trouble every summer in Bolshaya Pustomerzh, the village where Putin's parents and son went on vacation. 320 No

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Kolbin was not a businessman, and he certainly did not have the money to buy a stake in the field. And the stake cost no less than 80 million dollars. However, of course, this was a very low price. Market experts noted321 that Kolbin got the stake suspiciously cheaply (no one knew about Kolbin's close ties with Putin at the time; this will be revealed for the first time in 2016 in an investigation authored by one of the authors of this book). Years later, it looks very funny that Putin personally approved the sale of the Yamal LNG stake to his dissolute friend - this is one of the rare documented proofs of his corruption, literally a piece of paper with the suspect's signature. In December 2009, he was already serving as prime minister and headed the government commission on strategic assets (it must approve or reject transactions with large countries).

(including the gas field in Yamal). And Putin signed the deal with Kolbin. Soon after, Kolbin sold the asset at a market price of more than half a billion dollars (he paid him in that

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including Timchenko, who thus consolidated a significant share of Yamal LNG in his hands). The difference between the purchase and sale price is
This is also Putin's money.

It is unlikely that there is an example of a bigger one in global finance. more profitable pension contributions than the one Putin made when he temporarily stepped away from his presidential duties. But how justified were his fears that, after four years outside the Kremlin, he would not be able to return to power? With the benefit of hindsight, it's easy to answer: the fears were unfounded; Medvedev is a weak man, indebted to Putin, and would never have gone against his benefactor. But then, things don't look so clear-cut. It's enough to cite this example, told to us years later by one of the former members of Medvedev's circle.

zheniya.

The first months of 2011. The prime minister and president literally stopped communicating; they didn't see each other for an unusually long time, during which time Putin led a reclusive life in his residence outside Moscow. This was preceded by two events that caused a rift between the ruling couple.

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First, Medvedev, without consulting Putin, fired the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, one of the elder statesmen of Russian politics. Six months later, Medvedev and Putin engaged in a private but public spat over Russia's position in the civil war in Libya (Medvedev essentially supported the international military intervention that led to the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, and Putin was very unhappy about this. We'll cover this story in more detail below). And at the peak of this cooling in relations—at the end of March 2011—they decided to organize the Red Rocks rock festival in Sochi, a place both Putin and Medvedev love equally. They invited music stars from

from all over the world, and among others, the great rock band of the past, Deep Purple. Medvedev is very fond of this band's music, which was known to everyone around him. Initially, the event was conceived as an open-air concert in the mountains. But the Kremlin made adjustments—the concert was moved to the Winter Theater in Sochi, a pompous Stalinist building.

times, and in the hall—which looked surprisingly inappropriate!—they seated veterans of the Second World War. A surreal sight: old people

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listen to Deep Purple within the walls that remember Stalin. This crazy idea was born because Medvedev and his entourage were seriously preparing for re-election for a second term and wanted

combine business with pleasure: the president will listen to his favorite band and at the same time attend a patriotic event at a veterans' society. Absurd ideas end in absurdity. The concert took place, but you won't find any trace of it on the internet now. The Kremlin simply banned state media from writing about Deep Purple's arrival in Sochi; instead, journalists reported on Medvedev's meeting with the renowned band at his residence near Moscow (this meeting actually took place in those days, as the rockers performed not only in Sochi, but also in Moscow and St. Petersburg).322 As a result, Medvedev's second election campaign was never destined to take place. In August 2011, the president and prime minister, after

After a long break, they finally met for a detailed conversation in the most informal setting possible—on a fishing trip in the Astrakhan region. At first, the interim head of state was having fun: he caught a pike and, at the official

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He was beaming with happiness in the photographs. But soon a difficult conversation awaited him.

It is generally accepted that it was during this meeting that Putin confronted his successor with the fait accompli: he wanted to return to the presidency. And Medvedev, for some reason, agreed. We've already cited the theory of some of our interlocutors: perhaps Medvedev believed his patron's promise to swap places again in the future. But hope alone, of course, doesn't explain everything. The likely reason for Medvedev's acquiescence is that he, too, is deeply corrupt, a miniature version of

Putin, whose favor allowed him to enrich himself (interestingly, Sergei Ivanov, Medvedev's rival in the race for the post of "successor," has never been the subject of anti-corruption investigations and, by all accounts, is not obsessed with wealth. We are confident that this is not why he lost the "successor" race, but we consider it important to mention). If the palace in Gelendzhik has become a symbol of Putin's corruption for Russians, then Medvedev's symbol is a "duck house." This expression comes from an online investigation by Alexei Navalny.

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has become a popular saying in Russia, underscoring how petty and comical citizens viewed the man who led the world's largest country for four years. What kind of house is this?

In 2008, the newly elected president traveled to Plyos, a town on the Volga in the northern part of the Ivanovo region, a picturesque place celebrated by the eminent landscape painter Isaac Levitan. Medvedev was so captivated by the beauty of Plyos that he wanted to settle there. A suitable location was quickly found—the ancient Milovka estate on the banks of the Volga. In keeping with Russian elite tradition, Medvedev had to carefully conceal his new estate, so a six-meter-high fence immediately surrounded the 80 hectares. Numerous luxurious amenities were erected within—a huge cascading pool, a full-size chess court, and even a ski slope with ski slopes directly down to the Volga. But when Navalny's team's photos of the area leaked online, it wasn't these features that became a meme, but rather a decorative duck house on the pond adjacent to the estate.

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In 2016, Alexei Navalny's team managed to film the Medvedev estate from the air.

Anti-Corruption Foundation

The dacha in Plyos, registered, as expected, to nominees, wasn't an isolated incident of corruption on Medvedev's part—it was a logical part of his secret career, which developed in parallel with his official work biography. For example, it was revealed that the estate's construction was being carried out by the "Dar" charitable foundation, whose supervisory board was chaired by Medvedev's classmate, Ilya Eliseev. This foundation, which stood at the center of Medvedev's underground empire, received contributions.

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Oligarchs—in particular, Novatek owners Leonid Mikhelson and Leonid Simanovsky, billionaire Alisher Usmanov, and others. With the help of the Dar foundation, Medvedev acquired numerous assets: a vineyard with a castle in Tuscany, Italy, two yachts, an agricultural holding in the Kursk region, apartments in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and estates in the Moscow region and Krasnaya Polyana in the Caucasus. In short, everything Putin has, just on a slightly larger scale.

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Putin and Medvedev, August 17, 2011. The most famous episode, demonstrating the comic nature of this character and the extent to which he could be mocked,

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It happened in Crimea back in 2016. Speaking to a local pensioner, then-Prime Minister Medvedev said, "There's no money, but hang in there." Given Medvedev's personal wealth, the phrase sounded mocking and therefore resonated widely. Of course, in reality, Medvedev didn't say exactly that ("It [the indexation] isn't there anywhere, we haven't even considered it, there's just no money right now. We'll find the money, we'll do the indexation. Hang in there, all the best to you, good mood, and good health!"), but even the original phrase was utterly absurd, and its truncated version quickly became popular. Many of our government officials we spoke to recalled these words whenever Medvedev's name was mentioned in their presence. kremlin.ru

So, when Putin informed Medvedev while fishing that it was time for him to bid farewell to the throne, they both understood the skeletons the interim president had in his closet. Moreover, both clearly understood something else: even tarnished by corruption, Putin's authority among ordinary citizens was significantly higher than Medvedev's. If you ask any Russian, even one far removed from politics, to describe Medvedev with a single adjective, it would almost certainly be "pathetic." That's how the then president

nicknamed on social media, and this definition is as accurate as it is offensive. Corrupt and pro-

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A walker, but not scary like Putin, but pathetic and ridiculous. We'll talk about Medvedev later, but for now, let's return to the other characters in this chapter.

Shalva Chigirinsky hasn't lived in Russia for many years. The hotel renovation project
Arkady Rotenberg stole Moscow from him, and Roman Abramovich took his Siberian oil business (at the beginning of Putin's reign, he and Chigirinsky had become partners in several projects). After leaving the country, the businessman tried to sue his former partner, but it came to nothing. He now calls Putin's Russia "Romanov's Abramia"—in honor of Abramovich, who gave the tsar his first yacht. Chigirinsky is now involved in development in the West, although the scale of his projects is far smaller than his Russian ones. Sergei Kolesnikov also lives abroad. Over the years, he has become increasingly reluctant to recall his attempt to punish Putin for corruption. For several years, he personally maintained a website that compiled evidence in the Petromed case and the Gelendzhik palace. But the site has long since ceased operations.

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The multi-billion dollar construction assets that Putin's friends had stolen from Gazprom more than 15 years ago were destined for a most unlikely fate. Having barely acquired Stroygazmontazh and Stroytransgaz, Rotenberg and Timchenko began gorging themselves on cash—the two giant companies were awarded huge infrastructure contracts (primarily state ones). However, over the years, budget spending on bridges, tunnels, roads, and pipelines began to decline, so the margins in this business became increasingly smaller. Then Gazprom suddenly wanted these assets back. A highly opaque scheme was devised to buy the companies from Rotenberg and Timchenko, who ended up winning three times over: first they bought the means of production cheaply, then they made a tidy profit from their use, and then they sold them for a hefty price. The third person to benefit from this scheme was the shady and unremarkable head of Gazprom, former Putin aide Alexei Miller. During the resale, some of the former construction assets quietly ended up in the hands of nominees working for Miller. With the proceeds, he built a huge fortune in the Moscow region.

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A palace similar to the palaces of St. Petersburg.324 However, Miller's palace, like Medvedev's, is significantly smaller than the one Putin built for himself in Gelendzhik. No one in the country has a larger one than Putin's. This is the law of grotesque dictatorships like the one that has emerged in Russia.

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5. Nationalization of the elite

Why does Putin need to feign hatred of the West?

We spent a considerable amount of time asking our interviewees what was essentially a very simple question: when and why, in their opinion, did Putin develop a hatred for the West? The answers varied widely. Some believe Putin's anti-Western sentiments were formed during his KGB service, while others blame the 1990s, when Europe and the US supported shock economic reforms in Russia. It's entirely possible that Putin's KGB background and what he witnessed in the 1990s played some role in his subsequent views, but we don't believe it was significant. You've already seen that Putin benefited greatly from his rapprochement with the West in the 1990s. Early in his presidency, he didn't display any signs of anti-Western sentiment either. However, there was one event that deserves special mention.

Andrei Illarionov, a prominent economist, served as a presidential adviser from 2000 to 2005. Then, as now, he held radically liberal views on the economy, which is quite

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This didn't deter Putin, who invited him to work. In 1998, Illarionov became famous among officials for not only predicting Russia's August default on its foreign debt, but also for unabashedly conveying his forecast to the government. Putin took notice (on the advice of another economist from St. Petersburg, Alexei Kudrin). We will later cite some facts from Illarionov's biography, but for now, let's tell you what he answered to a question about Putin's dislike of the West.325 Early 2003. In March, the United States,

with the partial support of other NATO members and without UN Security Council approval, launched a military operation in Iraq to overthrow the dictator Saddam Hussein. The invasion was staged as if Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and only military force could stop the mad tyrant. The future will show that the pretext for war was fabricated by the Republican administration of George W. Bush, and the invasion of Iraq itself did not bring democracy and prosperity to that country (even though it cost Saddam Hussein his life). So, according to Illarionov, the American invasion of Iraq was a turning point.

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The turning point in Putin's attitude toward the West. "For months, there were numerous consultations in which Putin tried to persuade Bush not to start a war; administration officials met with the Americans, military officials met with military officials, and so on. I even went to Washington to do the same. But the Americans didn't listen," Illarionov recalls. One detail he recounted is telling: at the end of February, about a month before the invasion, the Kremlin tried to dissuade the Americans from war in the most subtle way possible. A Russian delegation led by Kremlin chief of staff Alexander Voloshin was in Washington at the time, but the real action was taking place in Baghdad. Yevgeny Primakov, a veteran of Soviet intelligence and at the time the leading specialist on Arab countries in the Middle East, was dispatched there. Primakov had a mission—on Putin's orders, he was to persuade Saddam Hussein to resign and thereby save the region from war. According to Illarionov, they were waiting in Washington for good news from Primakov in order to present their diplomatic success to the White House, thereby stopping the war in its tracks.

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The final moment. Primakov probably had some chance of a positive outcome, since he had known Saddam well for a long time. But the meeting between the two did not go well. "And our presence in Washington lost all meaning," says Illarionov. On the night of March 17, now three days before the start of the war, Putin made a last-ditch attempt, sending Primakov back to Baghdad. The parliamentarian later recounted that Saddam received him reluctantly in one of his palaces. "If you love your country and your people, if you want to save your people from inevitable casualties, you must resign as President of Iraq," Primakov conveyed Putin's words to the dictator. He summoned his confidants, said a few words, then patted Primakov on the shoulder and left. On March 20, the Americans invaded Iraq.

The most astonishing thing about this story is that in 2003, Putin, in order to give the Americans a gift, was willing to remove the country's legitimate leader from power (even though there were no democratic elections in Iraq). The Putin that modern journalists know is no longer like that: he

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was categorically against the removal of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Viktor Yanukovych in Ukraine, and so on.

As Illarionov suggests, the Bush administration's behavior in 2003 changed Putin's understanding of what is and isn't allowed in global politics. This is probably true. At the very least, he saw that a war against an undesirable state could be started without any particular reason.

and a reason, or even invent this reason.

But after 2003, the Russian Tsar
He didn't become a rabid anti-American or anti-Westerner. Putin's personal relationship with Bush Jr. suffered no damage, and his interest in foreign affairs never waned—the offshore companies and numerous trips to Western resorts by Putin's close associates remained intact. And even at the official level, everything seemed idyllic. It was no accident that Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, formulated the US administration's attitude toward opponents of the Iraq War as follows: punish France, ignore Germany, and forgive Russia.

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On May 9, 2005, that is, in the third year of the conflict in Iraq, Russia celebrated its 60th anniversary.
The 10th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War. Moscow that day literally became the center of world politics. Leaders of 53 countries, including the President of France, the Chancellor of Germany, the Prime Ministers of Italy, India, Japan, and the Chairman of the People's Republic of China, crowded around Putin on the Red Square podium. But closest of all was "friend George," as Bush was dubbed in the Russian press after Putin. 328 On the eve of the holiday, Putin gave an interview to the American television channel CBS, where he said things that are unbelievable by today's standards: the US President had every reason to suspect Iraq of possessing nuclear weapons, and now, after the American invasion, positive changes are taking place in that Middle Eastern country. 329 During the celebratory parade, he and Bush were inseparable, and in the evening, separately from the other leaders, they met at Putin's residence outside Moscow, where they went for a ride in a rare 1956 Volga. As if especially for the overseas guest, the car had an automatic transmission.

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American-style gearbox—with the shifter to the right of the steering wheel. And such an idyll was not uncommon—this was the presidents' 14th face-to-face meeting in four years. All of this was forgotten almost instantly on February 10, 2007. That

day, Putin delivered a 30-minute speech at the annual Munich Security Conference. This speech is considered a turning point in Russia's relations with the West. Putin arrived in Germany as a respectable global politician, albeit a lame duck—his last legitimate presidential term, at the time, was expiring in just over a year. The Russian leader settled into the front row. When German Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke from the podium about how Russia and the West cannot get along without each other, Putin didn't even seem to be listening—he was focused on finishing his speech. Of course, like any head of state, he

usually uses speechwriters, but he often finishes the texts of his most important speeches himself. That day seemed very important to him. Having finished his speech, he went to the podium and looked

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to the traffic lights in the hall, which indicated the time limit for each speech with a red light. “I hope that after two or three minutes <… > Mr. Teltschik *(the conference chairman, German politician Horst Teltschik – author’s note)*

“will not turn on the ‘red light’ there,” Putin hinted from the very first minutes that his words would be harsh330 . And it seems he was right: a single legal system is being imposed on the entire world, there is a “hypertrophic use of force,” which has not solved a single problem in international affairs, thus, a unipolar world, that is, a “world of one master,” has not come to pass, and now we need to think about the entire architecture of global security. It should be noted that these impersonal proposals are not our free paraphrase, but the very formulations of Putin, who clearly meant the United States by “master,” but tried to avoid criticizing this country directly. Moreover, he made an important reservation, which was forgotten over time: Putin said that many of his proposals are in line with the initiatives of President Bush, so Russia is consulting with “American friends.” But no matter how many reservations the Russian

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The Russian leader achieved his goal—the American administration, as well as many other politicians around the world, were surprised by his speech for its harshness. What happened between Putin and Bush in less than two years since that Volga car ride in the Moscow region? Why has Putin's rhetoric changed so dramatically? Based on numerous

In conversations, we can identify three reasons.

Just two months after the idyllic meeting on Red Square, the heads of Russia and the United States found themselves together again—this time in the United Kingdom, where the G8 summit was held in the summer of 2005. Members of the Russian delegation were noticeably nervous before the event. The fact is that, in addition to participating in the general program, where climate issues, which were of little concern to him, were discussed, Putin wanted to meet separately with "friend George" again. But the latter's administration was unsure whether he would have time for talks with the Russian president. Apparently, American bureaucrats hadn't put much effort into organizing the conversation, so in the end, the presidents agreed to it at the very last minute and only

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for 10 minutes. And although Putin and Bush met twice more that year, the Russian president harbored resentments over such incidents. According to our source in the then US administration, this was not entirely unfounded. Bush's inner circle included many opponents of rapprochement with Russia, who were reluctant to convey to their president the requests of their Russian counterpart, who wanted to meet and talk regularly. Meanwhile, the grounds for disagreement were accumulating: Bush was finding it increasingly difficult to justify Putin against the backdrop of numerous freedom violations in Russia, while the Russian president resented the Americans for supporting the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. *This was the first reason.* At the end of 2006, Putin realized that Bush and the Republican administration in general were weakening —

The US president's approval rating fell to a record low of 31%, and in November, his party lost both the House and Senate elections. Just three months after the Republicans' crushing defeat, Putin went to Munich to criticize the Americans for their past sins (from four years ago!). *This was the second reason.*

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"Why do we have to bomb and shoot at every opportunity now?" the Russian leader fumed, sitting next to Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, probably not yet imagining that seven years later he would himself give the order to bomb and shoot at his neighbor. (Pictured: Viktor Yushchenko, Angela Merkel, and Vladimir Putin at the Munich Conference on International Security, 2007.)

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However, *the third and perhaps most important reason* for Putin's harsh tone was entirely domestic. The president was leaving a stern order for the person who would eventually replace him in the Kremlin, Dmitry Medvedev, and was also pandering to that portion of the electorate.

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who desired to see some kind of external enemy, or at least a rival. According to a 2007 poll ,331 60% of Russians considered the United States an "unfriendly state"—this figure increased during the Bush administration, as anti-American sentiment steadily grew throughout the world (according to a global poll of the same year,332 only 40% of residents of various countries considered Washington's role in the world to be favorable. This is the lowest figure in the entire survey period from the early 2000s to the present). In short, Putin's rapid anti-American somersault also had entirely populist causes.

When Dmitry Medvedev took the throne, and in the USA When Barack Obama's Democratic administration came to power, everything seemed to be going well. In 2009, Obama, along with his wife and daughters, flew to Moscow to visit Medvedev. Everything indicated they had quickly found common ground. First, the presidents met in the Kremlin, where they talked for much longer than planned, signed several important treaties, and publicly exchanged compliments. And in the evening, they went to the Moscow region.

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Medvedev's private residence was already open for one-on-one talks. The aides also hit it off—Russian colleagues took Obama's press secretary and travel director to a separate room, where they got drunk on moonshine, so that the next day, compared to a beaming Obama, they looked unwell, but could boast that they had completely immersed themselves in Russian reality. 333 The following year, Obama was already calling the Russian president a "friend," 334 and Medvedev was literally beaming with happiness when, during a trip to California, he received a new iPhone as a gift and created a Twitter account right in the company's Silicon Valley office. That same year, 2010, the friends agreed on Russia's long-awaited accession to the WTO, and it seemed that relations between the two countries were experiencing perhaps their best period.

in history.

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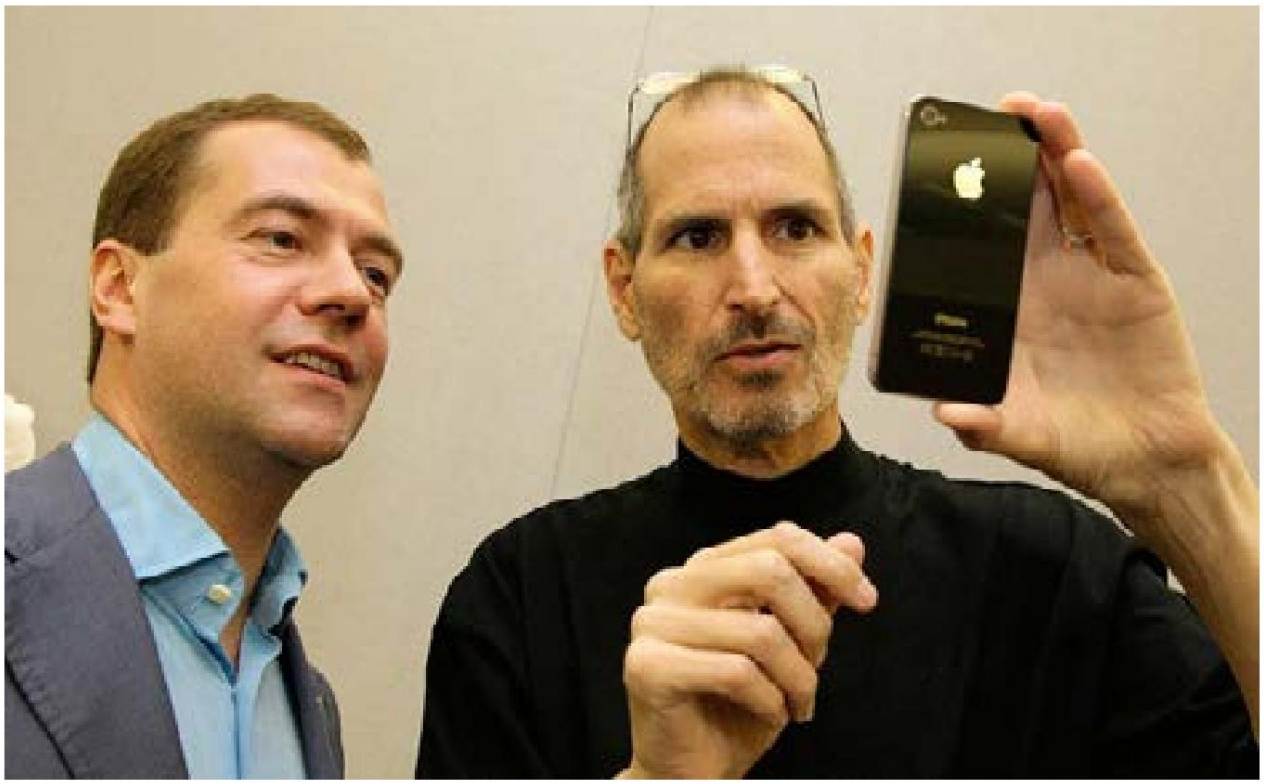

Dmitry Medvedev and Apple President Steve Jobs, 2010
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But one person wasn't thrilled with the situation. Even during his first official visit to Moscow, Obama met not only with President Medvedev, but also with the man who essentially appointed him—then Prime Minister Putin. He put on quite a show for the American guest, and with a hint. Obama and his aides arrived at Putin's residence outside Moscow for breakfast—a waiter in Russian folk costume, among other delicacies, served the guests various types of caviar and, of course,

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He brought out the samovar. The waiter dramatically removed his boot and, as was customary in taverns, covered the samovar's chimney with it. This made a strong impression on the Americans—at least, some of the participants in that meeting recall this detail first and only then the content of the conversation itself. And the content was important. Obama tried to start with a pleasantry, but Putin immediately interrupted him. The conversation was scheduled for an hour, and the entire time the Russian prime minister lectured his guest on the recent history of American-Russian relations. Without pausing for a second, he poured out his grievances against the Bush administration: America had not treated Russia as an equal partner, had supported the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, and so on. Putin repeated that he had a good attitude toward Bush, but blamed his team for everything. The Prime Minister recalled very precise details with a certain dramatic flair—for example, he showed his interlocutor where exactly on that same terrace Condoleezza Rice had once sat, who, after the Iraq War, promised to forgive Russia, but then, as Putin had said, began to interfere with relations between the two countries. All this time, Obama remained

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It was necessary to listen silently, and only after about an hour of conversation (which had to be extended) did the American leader open his mouth. Prime Minister Putin,

offended by the United States, and President Medvedev, who favored them, could not continue like this for long. Everything had to be decided in 2011, a very important year for both countries and, as subsequent events showed, for the entire world. Against the backdrop of the "Arab Spring" (as the series of revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa was nicknamed), the Americans attempted another military intervention—this time in Libya, where dictator Muammar Gaddafi was brutally fighting his opponents. The Obama administration hoped to look better than its Republican predecessors and, to this end, was determined to enlist the support of the UN Security Council, where Russia has veto power. Had Putin been Russia's president at the time, the United States would not have succeeded. However, as head of state, Medvedev was responsible for foreign policy. In early spring of that year, Obama sent Vice President Joseph Biden to negotiate with his Russian friend. The future American leader already knew

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Russia—he had visited it back in the 1970s. In 1979, the young American senator visited not only Moscow, where he was struck by Leonid Brezhnev's senile illness, but also Leningrad. It's easy to imagine that the security of his visit was ensured, among other things, by the young KGB officer Putin. The American administration was nervous about Biden's choice as a negotiator—he had a

reputation for "speaking first and thinking later" (as Obama aide Michael McFaul put it in his book). Moreover, Moscow was already tense without Biden: Medvedev's presidential term was expiring, and the elite was once again plunged into *uncertainty* about what and who would come next. And Biden didn't disappoint, in that during his short stay in Moscow, he managed to thoroughly anger Putin. For starters, the American guest declared that the prime minister should not return to the presidency. There are different versions in the media about how this statement came about. According to one version, Biden gave this advice personally to Putin during a closed meeting.337 According to another, he merely expressed

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this opinion, meeting with the Russian opposition338 . It is not so important which of this is true. The fact is that the undiplomatic statement of the vice president ended up in the press, and Putin harbored a grudge339. But that is not all. If we are to believe Biden himself, at a meeting with the head of the Russian government, he went even further, telling him: “The state

"Did you hear me, Prime Minister, I look you in the eye and I don't think you have a soul."340 Biden thus contrasted himself with Bush, who years earlier had said that he had looked into Putin's eyes and seen a soul there. It felt like a political challenge and a personal insult (we'll talk later about how Putin reacts to attacks and jabs). Subsequent events only increased Putin's irritation. Medvedev, for once, decided to act not only

without regard for Putin, but also, apparently, in secret from him. The Russian President unexpectedly offered Biden a one-on-one meeting, without aides, that is, in the most frank possible setting. It quickly became clear why Medvedev craved secrecy: to the great joy of the Americans, he hinted to Biden that he was prepared not to veto the resolution on

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Libya, that is, he actually sanctioned military intervention in the affairs of this country341.

A week later, the UN Security Council did indeed support the operation in Libya, which ultimately proved to be another failure for the Western coalition. Although the operation cost the life of the usurper Muammar Gaddafi, the bloody civil war dragged on for many years. Upon learning of the UN vote, Putin was furious and went on television to speak with workers at a Russian factory, where he declared that the decision to launch the operation reminded him of a "medieval call to crusade." Medvedev immediately issued a rebuke.

to his senior comrade, declaring that he considered such expressions unacceptable. For a brief moment, it seemed that the country was one step away from a final showdown over who was in charge in the ruling tandem. But it was only that. Six months later, Medvedev, looking deeply humiliated, nominated Putin for a third term. Anti-Western rhetoric during this term had already become a completely normal phenomenon of Russian life, just like, for example,

corruption.

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In 2012, Putin, once again the rightful ruler of Russia, gave a dramatic speech to deputies and senators. It was as if he were delivering the second part of his Munich speech, only this time to an internal audience. "Wait to applaud," he pretended to stop the crowd.

“You may not like everything yet” (as if he didn’t know that parliament had already been transformed by that time into “a place not for discussion”)342. And he proclaimed a course that Russian propaganda immediately called “the nationalization of the elites”343. It was in that speech that Putin uttered the term “spiritual bonds” and other hypocritical words. But there was something else too: he proposed banning officials and politicians from owning foreign bank accounts and shares. Those present, of course, applauded loudly. But it is very important to understand what kind of people these were. These were civil servants who, following the example of the recently ousted President Medvedev, acquired Apple phones, Mercedes cars, watches from numerous Swiss brands, civil servants who vacationed in the Alps and Miami, often in private villas, who sent their children to study in London.

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Don and New York. So the applause was fake, like the entire "nationalization" proclaimed by Putin. As has happened more than once, his rhetoric fell on deaf ears.

At first, the president and his most zealous advisers wanted to ban officials from owning foreign real estate as well. This idea—even before Putin's speech—was discussed with members of the cabinet of ministers. They rebelled, issuing an ultimatum: they would resign unless the real estate idea was abandoned. Vyacheslav Volodin, the then first deputy head of the presidential administration and a familiar court hypocrite, was sent to pacify the ministers. A very characteristic dialogue took place between the officials:

— There is a demand for nationalization in the country. elite," Volodin said.

"There's a demand in the country to hang us from the nearest pole—are we going to fulfill that demand, too?" one of the ministers fumed in response.

The government members had a lot to lose. Two deputy prime ministers owned property in Italy (Olga Golodets, who also owned property in Switzerland, and Alexander Khloponin).

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Education Minister Dmitry Livanov had a house in Spain, and Labor Minister Maxim Topilin had one in Bulgaria, although for a little secrecy, they registered the property in their wives' names. But that was only officially the case. By that time, through hidden schemes, almost the entire elite owned mansions and apartments in the West, so Putin had to shelve the idea of a real estate ban—even a tsar finds it hard to argue with nature itself. Instead, officials and deputies were given a sort of non-binding obligation: to declare their foreign square meters in their declarations (the location of the property and other characteristics were optional). But even this requirement was simply ignored by many. "Pechting"

A funny word that was often used in Russian media in 2012–2013, a symbiosis of a term used to describe sexual foreplay and the name of Vladimir Pekhtin, head of the State Duma Ethics Committee. This United Russia deputy was responsible in parliament for ensuring his colleagues' compliance with the law and morality. He mainly denounced those who went against Putin. And here's the rub: Pekhtin himself became the object of painful affection from

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The then-young blogger and politician Alexei Navalny was caught. He discovered that the head of the Ethics Committee owned expensive real estate in the US, which the deputy had "forgotten" to declare. Internet truth-seeking was new to the general public at the time, so Navalny's post about Pekhtin was literally quoted by ordinary people and reporters. Pekhtin was doubly unlucky. Putin, riding the wave of "nationalization of the elite," needed a scapegoat. As a result, Pekhtin resigned his State

Duma seat for good.

and was sent into true political oblivion—when we were finishing this book, the former head of the ethics committee was working as the technical director of a power plant under construction in the northern Leningrad region. But he was not punished in any other way—we cannot rule out that he still enjoys expensive American real estate. The only credit this scoundrel can give is the fact that it was he (unintentionally, of course) who made Navalny a major star of the Russian opposition, and the genre of online investigations itself the most popular for years.

forward.

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It was online investigations that would later reveal Putin's true attitude toward the problem. In March 2012, Navalny began exposing an official much closer to Putin than Pekhtin. This was First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov, a former lawyer who had worked for years with oligarchs in Putin's circle—Alisher Usmanov, Roman Abramovich, and others (Navalny had been publishing materials about Shuvalov for several years346). The blogger asked questions: were the money Shuvalov received from the oligarchs bribes? Why did the Deputy Prime Minister own property in the UK? How did the official's wife finance the flights of her dogs on a business jet? The internet exploded, but for Shuvalov, it all ended without the slightest visible consequences.

In general, the third term, as you have already seen more than once, was the height of Putin’s hypocrisy, and this also applied to relations with the West: in words, the US and Europe were declared enemies, but in practice they suited Putin and his nobles just fine.
as a place where you can and should hide money.

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It would be equally hypocritical for us to claim that Putin alone was to blame for the current abnormal situation. Western countries, organizations, and individual politicians also did much to make the Russian tsar view them, so to speak, *instrumentally,* as those who could be used for his own ends for a fee. And now it's time to utter the word "Olympics," which will be discussed in the next chapter.

meet very, very often.

The idea of holding the Olympics in Russia had likely been Putin's secret dream for many years. Back in 1994, his St. Petersburg boss, Anatoly Sobchak, wanted to organize the Games in his city (a plan for 2004 was discussed), and Deputy Mayor Putin, along with his other deputy mayor, Alexei Kudrin, already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, prepared an application to the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Of course, St. Petersburg lost—the city simply had neither the money nor the infrastructure. But soon the "St. Petersburgers" would move to Moscow, occupy nearly every leadership position there, and dream of the Olympics at every opportunity. In the winter of 2001, the young

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President Putin was in Austria, and after the protocol events, President Thomas Klestil invited him and his entire delegation to the famous ski resort of St. Anton. Over time, skiing would become a nearly mandatory skill for the Russian elite and its servants, but back then, Putin, already a more or less experienced skier, laughingly picked up the hats and mittens that fell from his clumsy bodyguards. The Austrian infrastructure impressed the president, and over dinner, the idea of building a similar resort in Russia arose. This project soon had to be significantly expanded: in 2006, Russia submitted a bid to host the Winter Olympics eight years later, in 2014—not in Putin's native St. Petersburg, but in his beloved Krasnodar region, in Sochi, where he lives part of the year. “They told us right away: if we want to get the Olympics, we’ll have to buy everyone off,” a former member of the Russian Olympic Committee recalls in a conversation with us. 347 The courtiers understood this too. Back in 2005, while traveling around the country looking for a place to hold the G8 summit,

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"Merks" - 2006, Kremlin and government officials stopped for lunch at a Sochi restaurant. The conversation turned to the Olympics. Suddenly, Kudrin, now the Minister of Finance, raised his glass. Usually, this man advocated at every meeting for spending as little budget money as possible—his position automatically presupposes a reasonable greed. But a restaurant is no place for stinginess. And the president's old friend frankly explained to his colleagues how Russia could secure the Olympics. "Financing must be done discreetly. We can't make public who is responsible for funding the Olympics. These are internal matters. The president takes full responsibility; he is the

one making this decision... For the bid to win, a political exchange with other countries is necessary." Combining our source's words with Kudrin's, we can formulate three simple principles for Russia in that struggle: establish a "black" budget, buy the votes of IOC members, and negotiate with the heads of state of other countries by offering them something in return. As it turns out, all of this

was possible; it just required secrecy.

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Everything was shrouded in secrecy. That same year, 2005, Putin wanted to attend the presentation of Russia's future IOC bid. He scheduled a meeting on the Black Sea coast, likely at one of oligarch Vladimir Potanin's homes. The president was terrified of a leak, so the meeting was kept as small as possible. Besides the head of state and Potanin, the meeting included sports official Leonid Tyagachev (Putin's alpine ski coach and one of the main lobbyists for the Sochi Olympics. In the 1980s, he allegedly collaborated with the KGB under the pseudonym "Elbrus"), Krasnodar Governor Alexander Tkachev, and Vladimir Kozhin, head of the presidential administration—no one else was present, not even his aides. As they began the presentation, these people realized they had overdone the secrecy, as none of them knew how to navigate slides on a computer. Potanin's daughter, Anastasia, who was nearby, had to be called in, and she handled the task.349 What was Potanin,

the same raw materials magnate who five years earlier had called on the oligarchs to "behave better," doing at that meeting? We remember that the Kremlin needed a "black" budget.

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to buy votes. Naturally, it was impossible to give bribes from the state budget.

For this reason, as a member of the Olympic Committee says on condition of anonymity, an unofficial fund was formed under the auspices of Potanin -

A group of 11 oligarchs was given the "homework" of contributing $10 million each to a "obshchak." Originally, "obshchak" is a criminal term for the money of a criminal organization. However, many of our interviewees also used the word to refer to state-affiliated funds. The money was donated by the people on the list below, apparently in part with the expectation of profiting from the Olympic construction (and for the vast majority, their expectations were met).

— **Vladimir Potanin,** the Inter-Ros company, built the Rosa Khutor resort for the Olympics.

— **Oleg Deripaska,** the Basic Element company, reconstructed the Sochi city airport, built the Olympic Village and the Imeretinsky cargo port.

— **Viktor Vekselberg,** Renova Group, invested in the hotel complex, including

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to the hotels Azimut Hotel Resort & SPA Sochi 4* and Azimut Hotel Sochi 3*.

— **Alisher Usmanov,** Megafon, built the telecommunications infrastructure of Sochi and received the exclusive right to build base stations.

— **Vagit Alekperov,** Lukoil, carried out the reconstruction of the Krasnopolyanskaya hydroelectric power station.

— **Vladimir Yevtushenkov,** AFK Sistema, his Cosmos Hotel Group has become a major hotel chain in Sochi350.

— **Mikhail Prokhorov,** ONEXIM, invested in "Rose Khutor"351.

— **Vladimir Lisin,** Novolipetsk Iron and Steel Works, there were no notable projects in Sochi.

— **Roman Abramovich,** Millhouse group, received large areas in the Gelendzhik region.

— **Iskandar Makhmudov** (through Andrey Bokarev), Ural Mining and Metallurgical Company, built the Shayba ice arena.

— **Dmitry Pumpyansky,** Pipe Metallurgy a water treatment company that dealt with water purification systems in Sochi.

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Nothing particularly clever was devised for the use of this money - Potanin's administrative manager, Elena Anikin, was responsible for the fund's expenses; she was included in the Sochi 2014 bid committee for this purpose. And the committee director, Dmitry Chernyshenko, was in charge of delivering

Cash around the world, using the diplomatic passport he'd been issued. As our interviewee describes, the bribes were primarily intended for IOC members from smaller states. Important players had to be approached differently. For example, how to secure the vote of an IOC member of royal blood—Albert II, son of actress Grace Kelly and the Prince of Monaco? In 2006, Albert wanted to go to the North Pole. Russia immediately organized an expedition for him.352 Moreover, after its completion, Putin didn't fail to invite Albert to the Kremlin. Over lunch, the Russian leader casually inquired whether the Prince wanted anything else, like a new house. He regretfully noted that there was no room to build a house in Monaco, but Putin was undeterred:

— Maybe we should build it somewhere else?

And the prince gave in, and at the same time gave Putin the full right to think about himself, and about other important

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People in the West saw them as *tools* that could literally be bought, albeit at a high price. Word for word, the Russian monarch learned from the Monegasque monarch that he owned land in the Alps, at the Roc-Agel farm, but still lacked a worthy estate. A team of Russian builders, apparently hired by the banker Sergei Pugachev, mentioned earlier in this book, immediately set off for France. Now Putin could be sure: he had another vote in his pocket. 353 A few months after that conversation, IOC members included Sochi in the shortlist of three cities bidding to host the Olympics, along with Pyeongchang, Korea, and Salzburg, Austria. The final vote took place in July of the following year, 2007, and, importantly, in two rounds—

First, one city was eliminated, and only then was the winner chosen from the remaining two. In Russia, they believed that it would be Sochi and Pyeongchang, so they needed to win over the Austrians—they could influence their supporters and effectively transfer votes to Russia. So, two months before the vote, Putin suddenly needed to fly to Austria again and conclude a large number of agreements there.

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A number of business agreements. There were also informal agreements, a member of the Olympic Committee assures us: the Austrians, for example, were promised a discount on Russian gas if Salzburg's votes went to Sochi in the second round. And then came July 2007. Putin doubted his victory

until the very last moment, or, more accurately, feared that a probable defeat would tarnish his infallible image. The discussion then was about who would attend the final voting ceremony in the capital of Guatemala. Putin was hesitant, but he devised a clever move. Around the same time, the Russian leader was scheduled to have his final meeting with his "friend" George W. Bush—the outgoing US president invited Putin on a fishing trip to his estate in Kennebunport, Maine. The plan was this: Putin, returning from the US, would stop by Guatemala en route, give a speech at the bid presentation ceremony, and fly home before the results were announced, so as not to, God forbid, appear sour in front of the cameras in the event of defeat. The Russian leader delivered a very impressive performance—he spoke in English for five minutes, including a famous...

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the famous “I promise”: he promised that there would be no traffic jams on the roads during the Olympics in Sochi355 . With so much money and such powers as his, this was the least the Tsar could promise. The fear of defeat ultimately proved empty—Salzburg's votes completed what the money of 11 Russian oligarchs had begun. Sochi won. The jubilant delegation decided to call the presidential plane, still flying somewhere over the Atlantic. Krasnodar Governor Alexander Tkachev was chosen as the envoy. The good news he brought played a significant role in the subsequent career of this remarkable man, as we will discuss later.

For the next four years, while Putin served as prime minister, the Olympics became his primary focus. By virtue of his rank, the head of government should have been handling such an infrastructure project, but given the personality of the prime minister, the Olympics were the most important matter for the royal court. Compared to them, even the fight against the economic crisis of 2008

2009 seemed like an annoying distraction
attention.

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In the next chapter, we'll detail how the president and his cronies used the Olympics to rake in the cash, as usual. But here, let's recall a striking episode that most vividly paints the picture of "Putin and the Olympics." Like any similar tournament, the Sochi Games needed an official symbol. Who could it be? The Kremlin apparently decided that choosing a fictional character wasn't as existentially important as, say, voting for delegates to government bodies, and so they allowed... free elections! Residents of Sochi could vote, and the list of candidates included several amusing little animals drawn by amateur artists from all over Russia. Don't laugh—

It was truly a free expression of will by 270,000 Sochi residents, and the outcome was that a skiing dolphin would become the Olympic mascot. The election took place on the same March day in 2008 when the country voted for a new president. So, one could say, the tandem of Dmitry Medvedev and the skiing dolphin came to power.

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Why did the Kremlin need to play at free elections in the case of the baby dolphin? No one
I still couldn't figure it out, but it ended the same way
manipulations, just like in the unfree plebiscite, which Medvedev won. Someone at the top didn't like the baby marine mammal, and the results of the Sochi vote were quietly annulled. Publicly, they said it was just one of the stages in choosing the mascot.356 But unofficially, journalists gossiped that the Sochi plebiscite was organized solely to increase turnout in the presidential elections—after all, people were much more eager to vote for the baby dolphin than for Medvedev. The new vote was made nationwide—it was decided to be held online and on television. The leadership

To manage this project, which became increasingly important with each new step, they assigned the entire deputy head of Putin's administration, Alexei Gromov, Russia's chief censor, to whom a separate chapter will be devoted at the end of the book. In other words, the animals became a matter of national importance. A new round of voting was scheduled for February 2011 —precisely at the moment when

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Tensions between Putin and Medvedev reached a fever pitch. The animals became a source of discord, and the Tsar's courtiers needed to clearly decide who they supported—Zoich the frog (blue for some reason), Barsik the leopard, or Pole the bear. Zoich was in the lead in the new vote. Barsik had been lagging behind, but he was Putin's candidate, as the then-prime minister himself unexpectedly admitted to journalists near the end of the vote. The effect was immediate—votes for Barsik soared as if by magic (or as a result of the ballot stuffing well known to Russians from regular elections). Medvedev, like Putin, had never been bothered by cheating in regular elections, but with the toy elections, the president decided to show principle. Medvedev said he favored the bear. To survive this incredible confrontation, the organizers of the vote, led by Gromov, had to steal the elections from the Russians again. Contrary to popular opinion, the winners were declared...

Lena has three talismans at once - a leopard, a bear and a hare that appeared out of nowhere (the frog fell

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(a victim of a conspiracy of falsifiers). But Medvedev stood by his principles: he reported problems with the vote count and demanded that such a thing not happen again. And that was it.358

This was the final principle President Medvedev accepted. In the new reality, first as prime minister and then as deputy chairman of the Security Council, he would do everything in his power to forget his brief infatuation with foreign countries, especially America. In the new reality created by Putin's hypocrisy, publicly liking the United States was no longer a trifle dangerous. If Putin were to read the flood of feverish anti-Americanism with which Medvedev floods his social media, he would have every reason to smile: he had clearly succeeded *in "nationalizing the elites ."* Perhaps not by persuasion, but at least by force.

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6. Golden toilets

How Putin Made Corruption the Norm

It's time to introduce another important character in this book, one who has appeared as an unnamed protagonist in almost every previous chapter. His name is Krasnodar Krai, or Kuban. These two names conceal a conflict. The current inhabitants of this southern region of Russia divide themselves into those who live in the coastal zone—the resort, wealthy territory—and the so-called "Kubanoids," or "Kubantsy," those who primarily live in the stanitsas (cossack villages) of the central regions of Krasnodar Krai. The former make fun of the latter, and the latter dislike the former. Economically, demographically, and culturally, these two parts of Krasnodar Krai are indeed very different, as if two regions were combined into one. This is an important context for our story.

The officials who govern Kuban are considered influential in the state hierarchy.
nymi - this has been the case since Soviet times. Not only is Kuban the breadbasket of Russia, it is also a vacation spot for the Moscow elite. Significant

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Part of the job of any Kuban boss, ever since the time of Joseph Stalin, has been to please high-status vacationers from the capital. This is also an important context for understanding what you're about to experience.

honor.

In 2000, the same year Putin came to power, Alexander Tkachev became the head of the Krasnodar Krai. More accurately, he didn't "become" but was elected (Putin would later abolish gubernatorial elections). This is an important distinction—the residents of Kuban voted for Tkachev in a still quite competitive election in 2000. The point is that Tkachev is an absolutely brilliant opportunist, able to exploit any political opportunity to his own advantage. His entire career seems tailor-made to confirm the main thesis of our book: Putin and his entourage have no ideology; they can change their views at breakneck speed, simply to rule and enrich themselves. Tkachev is a typical "Kubanoid"; he was born and raised in the village of Vyselki, from which, until a certain point, he never really left. During the Soviet era, his father was a local party leader and later headed the Vyselkovsky Combine

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A factory. With the return of private ownership, Tkachev Sr., as often happened in the 1990s, became the owner of the factory he had previously managed in the interests of the state. Business success accompanied many "red directors," and some even became among the top oligarchs close to Putin. Tkachev Sr. did not reach such heights, but his family's wealth and influence in his native region were enormous. Various businesses related to agriculture became the foundation of the Tkachev family company. In the 1990s, his sons, Alexander (the future governor) and Alexei (a future State Duma deputy), joined their father. The younger Tkachevs combined business and politics since the time when it was not prohibited by law, and when the laws changed, they simply registered their companies in the names of other people. Alexander had the most serious affair with politics. And this affair was built on absolute ob-

flaws.

At first, Alexander served as a local deputy, joining the then ruling party, "Our Home is Russia." Then he left it and was elected to the State Duma as a representative of the local Cossacks, along the way becoming a radi-

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having radically changed his views, he became a left-wing nationalist. A former communist, he joined the Communist Party, railing against immigrants and capitalists (while still owning a huge business). In the State Duma, Tkachev became a champion of opportunism when he simultaneously joined two parliamentary groups: one for friendship with NATO, the other against it. His entire subsequent career was the same, total opportunism, which with each new episode reached ever more impressive proportions. Naturally, Tkachev would later defect from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation to the new ruling party, United Russia, but upon his defection, he forgot to notify his former comrades of his withdrawal and won the next election, legally being a member of both parties. And when it came time to run for governor in 2000, Tkachev easily played into the traditional views of the rural voters of Kuban—he was "one of our guys," railing against Jews, Armenians, and the rich. With this populism, Tkachev achieved a better result than Putin in the presidential elections – more than 82%, which is an incredible amount even for Russia, especially in 2000. As a deputy and then governor, Tkachev began to get used to Moscow, but

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Until a certain point, Putin's new bureaucracy didn't accept him. A Moscow acquaintance explained to Tkachev: "Putin's friends include plenty of Jews and other 'foreigners,' and they consider you a rabid anti-Semite." The interlocutor advised Tkachev to "build bridges" with the new elite and be patient. And in this, Tkachev has no equal. A former official recalls the following scene: Tkachev arrived to "build a bridge" with the new head of the Russian economy, minister, and Putin protégé, German Gref. Gref is German and considered a progressive thinker compared to the rest of Putin's inner circle. "Sasha, you're a scumbag, I won't shake your hand!" Gref began the meeting, and Tkachev did as he was advised—"he stood there and ducked." An eyewitness says that Tkachev's verbal humiliation lasted for at least 10 minutes, and the entire time the governor listened obediently without saying a word (he didn't argue even when he finally managed to open his mouth).361 Or another story: in Russia at the beginning of Putin's time, there was a very influential and powerful Prosecutor General, Vladimir Ustinov. We mentioned him briefly at the beginning of the book as a person who at some point

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At that moment, he imagined himself a politician of equal stature to the president, for which he paid with his career. While Ustinov was still powerful and everyone feared him, Tkachev needed such an ally. The Prosecutor General had three characteristics that Tkachev turned to his advantage. First, Ustinov himself came from Kuban, and therefore considered himself (and probably not without reason) a great expert on the region, its, so to speak, "patron." Second, Ustinov possessed, so to speak, a unique style of business communication. "I would have put you in jail for years

"Seven," was a standard joke, or perhaps a threat, which he used every time in conversation.362 Many were frightened by such jokes. And finally, the third peculiarity of the Prosecutor General was that he loved (and probably still loves) drinking beer. "Liters, for hours

"Five to sit and drink," a friend described him to us. And Tkachev was not at a loss: he could sit for long hours with Ustinov over beer, obediently pretending
piercing the victim.

However, Tkachev was unable to establish a trusting relationship with Putin in the same way. Something else was needed. The president often vacationed in Sochi or the Krasnaya Polyana Mountains.

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People were involved, but the organization of this leisure time was always handled by Kremlin officials, not the local governor. This was an insurmountable obstacle. Tkachev's breakthrough came in 2003. Russian officials then caught wind of the ruler's new passion —yachts, also known as "boats." Putin's first "boat," the Olympia, had just arrived in Sochi. And Tkachev found a way to bribe the president. He borrowed a yacht from a local businessman—an expensive but not very spacious one—and offered Putin a boat cruise. Putin not only agreed, but also offered to take the "boat" to Yalta in Crimea for another round of talks with Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma. And so they did: the private yacht carrying Putin sailed to Crimea, escorted by Russian Navy patrol ships. However, it turned out to be too cramped for Putin's entourage. As a result, FSB chief Nikolai Patrushev, who accompanied Putin, spent part of the journey dozing on the sofa in the mess hall—there was no other place for him. The "boat" was called "Destiny." One of our interlocutors believes that after this incident, fate smiled on Tkachev, and he became...

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As they say, "a respected man."363 He further cemented this status when, in 2005, he was the first to propose building a presidential residence near Gelendzhik. Tkachev wanted to attract investment to the abandoned Gelendzhik airport and the surrounding vineyards, and he approached the Kremlin with an idea: why not build a new state dacha for Putin on Cape Idokopas? The Kremlin was interested, but it soon became clear that it wouldn't be a dacha, but a real palace, and that it wouldn't be state-owned, but a private residence, registered to shell companies at that. But Tkachev, naturally, didn't object.

The governor found a way to appeal to practically everyone. Business jets delivered "parcels from Tkachev" to Moscow: ministers received gifts of village delicacies—sausage, cheese, chicken, fish. He charmed not only the ministers—Tkachev knew all of Putin's inner circle, who followed their boss to Sochi. This included the president's friends, his security guards, his staff, and protocol officers. "Everyone wanted something from Tkachev—they all had a business, or property in Sochi, or needed a vacation package. And Tkachev...

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was the king of "Kuban entertainment"
laughs a former local politician. The highlight of the Tkachev entertainment program was the Kuban Cossack Choir. This musical group is, figuratively speaking, one of the pillars of Russian statehood under Putin. The folk choir, truly very talented, has been sent by the Kremlin on the most important foreign missions—to sing and dance at the court of the Queen of England, at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, at NATO, and at the wedding of Austrian Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl, a prominent Russian ally. In the latter case, the Cossack choir was personally brought to the wedding by Putin, and this is no coincidence. During his downtime, the president enjoys listening to and even singing along with the Cossacks, whose repertoire includes numbers in Ukrainian. The Kuban choir's hit is "Oy, stok, stok," a song about rural life with a hint of existential problems. Typically, it's performed by a young, beautiful soloist, a woman with a southern flair. Tkachev's subordinates often found such performers in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, where Cossack singing traditions were preserved. The soloists were brought to Sochi and quickly rewarded with Russian

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Citizenship was granted and they were allowed to perform for distinguished guests. Local businessmen, eager to please the authorities, invested in the Cossack choir. Some bought costumes, others provided the soloists with handsome bonuses. In short, if filmmakers ever need a more graphic portrayal of political opportunism under Putin, they can tell the story of the Kuban Cossack Choir. But the main character in this film will still be Governor Tkachev. Many attempted to undermine his power, but he somehow remained afloat. Tkachev

suffered an unexpected blow on November 4, 2010. Then, in the Krasnodar village of Kushchevskaya, local bandits shot, stabbed, kicked, and burned alive 12 people within minutes, including four children, one of whom was a nine-month-old girl—it was her that the bandits placed alive on a pile of bodies and set ablaze. A local farmer, many of his relatives, and their random guests were killed; those fleeing were finished off in the street, and the most defenseless were killed in front of adults. Having committed the atrocity, the killers went out to drink and...

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They went to a local café for dinner, which later helped quickly identify them.

The crime was so horrific that local and national media, even those controlled by the authorities, began reporting on it. The scandal grew and grew. The situation became even more outrageous when it was revealed that a gang, led and affiliated with representatives of the local elite—district politicians and businessmen—was behind the massacre. For years, the gang's leaders had been members of the Tsapkov family—father, mother, their two sons, and the latter's uncle. At the time of the murder in Kushchevskaya, the leader of the criminals was Sergei Tsapkov, a district council member and head of a large agricultural business, Arteks. "In the Krasnodar Territory, Tkachev always knew every little detail about agriculture; no one could do anything there without his knowledge. Of course, Tkachev knew the Tsapkovs inside and out,"
a former politician who knew the governor well told the authors of this book.365 Politically

envious people certainly helped foster anti-Tkachev sentiment at the top. In the Kremlin, where Dmitry Medvedev was then in charge,

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girls, were very angry with the governor. “This is the place where the president lives part of the year, and it turns out that gangs roam there and kill everyone around,” a source describes the mood of the Kremlin. 366 Tkachev had to save the situation... And he went on live television, which, as it soon turned out, was a mistake. In general, Tkachev’s interview, shown on the program “Pozner” on February 7, 2011, should be included in textbooks on how a politician should not speak in public. 367 It was a resounding failure. Tkachev talked a lot, most of the words were not connected either to each other or to common sense, it looked like a satirical sketch about a dim-witted nomenklatura member. Although it was not funny, because Tkachev said the key things then quite sensibly, and they were nightmarish. For example, he said that the murder in Kushchevskaya was not so terrible in itself, as

seemed so in the presentation of political con-

the governor's kurents. "They came to kill some, but by chance there were many more people there," he said, lamenting the fact that so much was written and said about the gang. It was clear that Tkachev really wanted to stay in power and, as

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always ready to disgrace himself for it ("We will grow more potatoes"—that's how, with the utmost inappropriateness, Tkachev began the interview provoked by the bloody massacre). Compared to the governor, even the eternally loyal TV presenter Vladimir Pozner could have seemed like a star of honest journalism. Towards the end of the conversation, he accused Tkachev of not knowing the name of the writer Marcel Proust and sent the guest away in peace. In another situation, such an interview would have buried the career of a public politician, not to mention the fact that nothing would have remained of it even earlier—

Immediately after the murders in Kushchevskaya. But Tkachev was not touched; he stood firm again.

I would like to warn you against dismissing Tkachev as a fool. This "fool," before and after the massacre in Kushchevskaya, in moments of success and in moments of failure, single-mindedly continued the main work of his life—he selflessly enriched himself, continually expanding his secret business, buying up land, livestock, agricultural transport, and equipment. Some time would pass after the events in Kushchevskaya, and the Tkachev family's firms would become the largest owners of agricultural...

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farmland in Russia.368. A career somewhat similar to the fates of medieval jesters: they disgraced themselves publicly in order to sooner or later become rich nobles. However, we will talk about Tkachev's subsequent career at the end of the chapter, and now let's return to its main character—Krasnodar.

sky region.

The massacre in Kushchevskaya was an excess, albeit sudden, but predictable. Something similar had been happening for years in Kuban, both in the fiefdoms of the "Kubanoids" and in the refined coastal cities. The region was divided between criminal groups closely connected to the authorities, and corruption and its impunity reached fabulous proportions. Under Putin, the Krasnodar region has become a model region.

nom from the point of view of theft and related matters
violence.

Back in the 1980s, a Russian girl named Elena Khakhaleva was vacationing in Sukhumi, the administrative center of Abkhazia, an autonomous republic within Soviet Georgia. 369 The Abkhazian Black Sea coast was a popular summer vacation destination for Soviet citizens. But the place itself wasn't all that Soviet: Abkhazia.

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It was a corner of underground capitalism (illegal businessmen, or so-called "tsekhoviki," secret gambling operations, criminality—there was plenty of all of that in the republic). It was also a place for resort romances. Elena also had an affair—with a local man named Robert Zilpimiani. Returning home, Elena divorced her husband and married Zilpimiani. The latter then took his wife's surname, becoming Robert Khakhalev. This is a rather rare practice, which usually indicates that a man wants to hide his past or is embarrassed by his own surname. In Zilpimiani's case, both explanations are possible: his circle was full of people connected to Georgian crime, and he began building a career in Russia, where life with a difficult-to-pronounce southern surname could be difficult. One way or another, the Khakhalev couple settled in Kuban. With Putin's rise to power, Elena's career took off—she became a judge, first working in a small court in the Krasnodar region, and soon rose to deputy chairperson of the entire regional court. In other words, Khakha-

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For many years, Leva was the second person in the judicial system of a large region, and it was
She oversaw almost all property matters in Kuban, in particular those concerning land ownership. At the same time, Robert Khakhalev became one of the largest landowners in the region (his lands, registered to a fictitious

(of persons, comparable in area to those owned by the Tsapkov family, but, of course, inferior to those of the Tkacheva family). For many years, this situation, which would be correctly called a conflict of interest, did not bother anyone, although almost everyone in Kuban knew about the Khakhalev family. Moreover, Khakhaleva also became related to her immediate superior, the head of the entire judicial authority in the region, Alexander Chernov, through the marriage of her children. This, perhaps, is also a conflict of interest, but it did not bother anyone, although it was widely known. Years of fruitful work brought noticeable results: Robert and Elena Khakhalev acquired a lot of expensive real estate, luxury cars, and the title of "respected people." This situation could have continued indefinitely, even until the end of Elena's days.

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Khakhaleva (a judge's position not only carries legal immunity but is also granted for life) would have been dead if Sergei Tsapok's thugs hadn't simultaneously murdered 12 innocent people in 2010. The brutality of the murder attracted widespread attention, so the Tsapok family was unable to escape harsh punishment (even though they, too, had strong ties to both judges and the police, which had protected the Tsapoks from trouble for many years). All the gang's leaders received long or life sentences; some, like Sergei Tsapok himself, have already died in prison. The agricultural empire they had created was left without an owner. Competitors—including Governor Alexander Tkachev's firm—began a fierce battle for the no-man's-land. The enterprising Judge Khakhaleva was absolutely essential. In short, the judge made several decisions in favor of one of the Tsapkov land claimants. Naturally, the other players harbored a grudge and decided to take revenge on the judge. Revenge turned out to be quite simple, because it didn't take long to find damaging facts about the judge: her entire career is one big discredit.

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A shocking fact. The first thing ill-wishers did was leak a video of the Khakhaleva daughter's wedding to the media . Iosif Kobzon, Nikolai Baskov, and other stars sang at the celebration, their combined fees disproportionately exceeding the judge's entire legal income throughout her career. If we were to compare it to something of real-world value, it would be like this: Frank Sinatra and Liberace, along with a group of other stars, all attended the wedding of a minor judge. A serious scandal ensued, but Judge Khakhaleva held her own. Then came another leak. It turned out (according to our source, this is most likely true) that Khakhaleva never graduated from her first university—she presented a fake diploma and, accordingly, illegally held her position for nearly 20 years. This is when the scandal became truly unpleasant. Some officials demanded that Khakhaleva be punished. Others defended her because admitting forgery would mean something incredible: if Khakhaleva was a fake judge, all her decisions

The rulings on multi-billion dollar property disputes over 20 years should be overturned, while simultaneously acknowledging that Khakhaleva was covered for by her bosses for years

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in the Supreme Court (Russia's highest judicial body has an influential lobby from Kuban). The behind-the-scenes battle between the former and the latter continued for nearly three years; all this time, Khakhaleva continued to make decisions, all the while promising to provide a real university diploma. She ultimately denied the presence of a diploma.

and failed to prove it, but instead quietly left for her husband's homeland, Georgia, simply stopping going to work. The new owner of the Tsapkov lands, in whose favor Judge Khakhaleva had made a number of important rulings, also quietly left the country. Criminal cases in absentia were opened against both of them, and the land disputes continued.

What's most important about the history of the Khakhalev family, the Tsapkovs, and many other "respected people" of Kuban is this: for years, almost everyone knew about their dubious activities and ostentatious wealth, which disproportionately disproportionately disproportionately large incomes. And this was considered normal. Due to the peculiarities of its history, Russia has always been a country far more tolerant of corruption than, for example, Western rule-of-law states. But under Putin, the boundaries of this tolerance have greatly expanded. Socio-

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Logical studies have revealed a surprising picture: the overwhelming majority of Russians have always named corruption as the main or one of the main problems facing the state (during President Medvedev's presidency, a record 90% of respondents held this opinion371), yet a significant percentage of citizens consistently allowed the use of bribes to resolve personal issues. Among the problems that could be resolved with a bribe, Russians have always confidently named relations with the traffic police (GAI, and later GIBDD)372. Police corruption is a byword in Russia. The comical term "golden toilets," which we used in the title, also originates from this source. In 2021, in Stavropol—a region neighboring Kuban with roughly the same characteristics—the head of the local traffic police was detained. He had been openly engaged in bribery for many years, and managed to build and buy more than 20 properties with his illegal proceeds, and only then was he arrested. A search of one of his luxury homes revealed, among other things,

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Toilets with a coating resembling gold leaf were found in a garrison of ostentatious wealth. A very humorous debate ensued in the media: were the policemen's toilets really gold-plated or were they plastic made to look like precious metal?373

The authors of this book once had a curious conversation with a high-ranking government official. He was defending a colleague whose secret palace we had discovered in the Moscow region. "Where do you think he should live? In a three-room apartment?!" the interlocutor demanded heatedly. Life as an official under Putin is no picnic, he argued. On the one hand, you have to match the level of income of other "respected people," be able to throw lavish parties, go out, drive nice cars, and have a secret bank account abroad so that, if necessary, you can escape and live comfortably. On the other hand, you have to be extremely careful and conceal your true well-being—both from society and from your peers, because wealth breeds envy and can lead to problems, as ultimately happened with Khakhaleva or the traffic police officer on a gold plated vehicle.

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Toilet. In the previous chapter, we described how Putin's hypocrisy forced officials to live a double life: publicly disparaging everything foreign, while secretly coveting foreign blessings. The same thing happened with corruption: officials had to be rich while pretending to be poor. This is no easy task, and not everyone was up to it. As we were finishing writing this book, Russian law enforcement detained Deputy Defense Minister Timur Ivanov. It was his house, discovered several years ago, that sparked the dispute with the government official described above. Ivanov—probably due to his own excesses—failed to follow the unspoken rule: he was conspicuously rich, rich in a way that a general serving in the civil service in a country at war could not be. Houses, cars, vacations at the best resorts, wives who changed their fur coats and jewelry every night. As you've already realized, Timur Ivanov didn't become corrupt overnight. He lived in luxury for years, barely concealing it. But it wasn't until 2024 that this landed him behind bars. Or was that it? In Putin's Russia, people aren't arrested for corruption.

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the same government official explained to us:
Corruption is just a gimmick for the TV news, while the real reasons for disgrace are always different, political or personal. It's the same story with Ivanov. Thousands of veterans of the war against Ukraine live on meager payments, while Timur Ivanov's wife vacations on the French Riviera. So, the arrest of the "presumptuous corrupt official" was simply politically advantageous for Putin. The same has happened with all the other anti-corruption campaigns over the past 25 years. If one of the "respected people" was detained under corruption charges,

and the news showed some outrageous evidence of this crime ("golden pens," "gold coins from the tsarist era," the same "golden toilets"—there was always something with the adjective "golden"), then each time the true cause of the incident was not theft or bribery at all. In all cases, the victim was devoured by their peers or by political expediency. One day, this rule reached a comical embodiment. On a summer morning in 2016, Putin's old KGB buddy, the head of Russian customs, Andrei Belya-

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Ninov was awakened by a knock on the door. Approaching the uninvited guests in a floor-length embroidered robe, the customs officer learned he was about to be searched for smuggling. Footage of the search was immediately released to state media, and it featured everything we've already described—paintings in gilded frames, gold pens, and cash in various currencies stuffed into shoeboxes.

Gazeta.ru

It remains unclear who dared to do this to Putin's friend—whether the president himself or other security officers in his entourage. Either way, Belyaninov lost his job, but

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The investigation against him was halted. Putin even had to publicly state375 that he did not approve of the media showing footage of a search of a "respected person." In other words, the president said: corruption cannot be prosecuted; corruption is the norm.

We must confess to a mistake. We spent most of our journalistic careers investigating corruption.

Theft from the budget, kickbacks, fraud, and the like. We thought we knew all about it, but at some point, quite by accident, we realized we were completely misjudging the scale of the problem. That day, one of the authors of this book was sitting on the terrace of a club hotel on a Caribbean island. A meeting had been arranged there with a State Duma deputy—he was sailing in the warm seas at the time. The deputy was in a protracted financial dispute with a business partner, who, coincidentally, was a member of the Federation Council. Neither deputies nor senators are legally allowed to run businesses, but we were still prepared for the fact that they were all secret billionaires. But what we weren't prepared for was

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to the brazenness with which Putin's court ignores anti-corruption regulations. The interviewee, barely beginning his story, repeatedly used the phrase: "Well, we gave him/her/them 5/10/100/200/500 million."376 He was referring to dollars, "greenbacks" in our interviewee's slang, and the episodes described concerned everything. He and his partner gave kickbacks to other deputies, businessmen like themselves, bribes to officials, gifts—

For example, to the head of the Kremlin administration, Anton Vaino, a stake in a business for the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, and handouts to corrupt journalists and bloggers. They gave and they continue to give. At some point, the original topic of conversation faded into the background, and I, Roman Badanin, as if fascinated, began counting how many times the verb "to give" was repeated in the deputy's speech. It turned out to be no less than forty in a four-hour conversation. Having reached my inexpensive hotel, I still under the impression I called my co-author and said: "We are either idealists or idiots." The Roman formula "I give so that you give" in a new, distorted interpretation has become the motto of Putin's economy—it is by this that the country lives. To

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To demonstrate this clearly, we have a funny story involving, naturally, the main character of the book377.

When Putin worked in St. Petersburg in the 1990s, a man named Vagif Mamishev was also a small businessman there. It's difficult to describe who he is. He now calls himself the leader of the local Azerbaijani diaspora and an entrepreneur, although legally he doesn't have any specific business. Friends described Mamishev.

the words "shashlik maker" and "hustrila", in the sense that his main activity is to establish connections with people, often with the help of a roast
meat, and then use these contacts for his own enrichment. Mamishev began in the 1990s by supplying the St. Petersburg elite with fresh greens (no quotes) from the Sofia vegetable warehouse in the south of the city. Cilantro, tarragon, and other sources of vitamins are a perennial commodity of Azerbaijani traders. The same commodity is shashlik. This is what Mamishev was doing. When officials wanted to throw a banquet, the "shashlik maker" was always there. Need a basket of greens? He was right there. This is how Mamishev became acquainted with Putin's entire entourage; his bosom friends include Evgeniy

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Murov, Anatoly Serdyukov, Alexander Beglov, Valentina Matviyenko, and so on. It was thanks to his connections that Mamishev got to attend Putin's first inauguration in 2000. He was one of the hundreds of enthusiastic people who greeted Putin in the pompous Kremlin interiors. Mamishev told friends that he even shook Putin's hand there, but he was most likely lying.

according to the protocol of the official part of the inauguration of Putin Tin walked through the Kremlin halls at a distance from the applauding crowd. Proximity to power makes vicious people even more vicious: Mamishev, as the story goes, loved to lie about his high connections, which led to him being the subject of jokes time and again. For example, he once decided to go beyond a basket of greens and presented Putin's dignitary, the governor of St. Petersburg, Beglov, with a business suit. Perhaps Mamishev was so close to Beglov that he even knew his measurements, or perhaps he tailored the clothes by eye. The governor wore the new suit a couple of times to some public events. This inflamed Mamishev's pride—he trumpeted to his acquaintances that he was now not only feeding but also dressing the authorities. Beglov

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He was embarrassed and returned Mamishev's worn-out suit. The "shashlyk maker's" relatives were no different. For example, one nephew made it into the crime news when he raced a nine-ton Kamaz truck on the streets of St. Petersburg.378 Before that, the Mamishev family had bought a vintage truck—the one the Russian team had once used to win the Dakar Rally. Another nephew, who, thanks to the "shashlyk maker's" connections, had been appointed deputy head of one of St. Petersburg's districts, arrived at work in a Rolls-Royce.379 Such boastfulness about his own wealth proved excessive even by the standards of Russian bureaucracy, and the young man was quietly promoted to another position.

job title.

But in reality, there's no reason to smile. Despite all his anecdotal qualities, Mamishev is a truly important figure in Putin's system, because he receives by giving. He's now associated with major construction projects, he advises the government on national issues, he travels with Putin's entourage on official business trips, and ministers and billionaires are ready to gather at his restaurant at his invitation. We're talking about quite a few

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A specific restaurant—it's called "Tsar's Court," which, in the context of our book, will sound mundane. Nizami Mamishev, Vagif's nephew, who drove to work in a Rolls-Royce, ultimately lost nothing either. He now serves on the St. Petersburg City Hall's External Relations Committee, the very same committee where the Mamishev family's idol, President Putin, began his career. So all the greenery gifted to officials has been returned to the Mamishevs a hundredfold in the form of more "greenery."

If there's one thing the state has truly struggled with under Putin, it's the fight against corruption. The fight against corruption is the same counterintelligence in which Putin began his career in the secret services. How to keep society from learning about corruption has truly occupied the minds of Putin and his entourage all these years. As a result of Putin's 25 years in office, not only have independent media been destroyed (we'll talk about that later), but any attempt to learn anything about the ruler's well-being has been made essentially impossible.

and his retinue.

— First they restricted it, then they artificially distorted and ultimately completely blocked access to real estate data.

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— A significant portion of government procurement, the federal budget, and regular government spending was classified. In some cases, attempts to obtain this information were criminalized. This was done in response to a public campaign organized by opposition leader Alexei Navalny: volunteers across the country uncovered unaffordable luxury items in government procurement —gold-plated dinnerware sets, super-expensive cars, books in precious bindings, and similar items that ordinary citizens paid for with their taxes at the whim of officials. — Obtaining information about...

employees of law enforcement agencies.

— At first they demonstratively did not comply, and then they completely cancelled the public declaration.
the distribution of income and property by officials.

— Legalized the deletion (including pre-trial) of information from the Internet.

— They criminalized slander — for this reason
the article may condemn the person who tells the story
including corruption.

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— First, they restricted, and later criminalized, the use of drones for photography and videography. In many places where Putin's elite have luxurious homes, no-fly zones have been imposed or electronic warfare systems have been installed.

— They have made it impossible to hold protests, and corruption was one of the main reasons for such events.

Even in the fight against corruption, Kuban proved to be a leading region. When the Winter Olympics were scheduled to take place there, a true renaissance of civil society took place in the region. Environmental and anti-corruption activists began filming and publishing evidence of all sorts of violations online. The activists had doubly more work to do, considering that more and more government officials were settling right here on the Black Sea coast, inevitably violating building and environmental regulations. Local activists with video cameras broke down fences, forced their way onto properties, inspected access to the coast, and did other similar things, causing

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"Respected people" are a constant headache. The authorities tolerated this for a while, but then they simply raided Kuban's main environmental organizations with searches and criminal cases. One of the local activist leaders, Suren Gazaryan, organized raids on Alexander Tkachev's dacha and the grounds of Vladimir Putin's palace. Two criminal cases were opened against him, and his only escape was hasty emigration. He now lives outside of Russia, and most of Kuban's activist organizations have been destroyed.

Ultimately, the Olympics took place without much interference from an outraged public. There weren't many dissatisfied people. During the tournament, Russians admired the beautiful opening and closing ceremonies of the Games, rejoiced at the unprecedentedly large number of national medalists, but they rarely considered the price tag. And the price tag was incredible—at least $50 billion. The Sochi Olympics are still the most expensive in history, both among Winter and Summer Games, which is absurd in itself. But even this fact received little attention.

mania.

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The main government agency responsible for preparations for the Olympics was called "Olympstroy." Despite its name, this state corporation built only one Olympic facility out of many dozens (most

The rest were built by private companies, which, in turn, received loans from state banks). For such a small contribution to the construction, Olympstroy received a property contribution from the state of approximately 9 billion dollars. The head of this ineffective structure was Dmitry Kozak, another "St. Petersburg" friend of the president. He hired

He was small and then fired the general directors of Olympstroy—each new one was as weak as Kozak's personnel sense. But this did not affect his own career. For almost 25 years now, Kozak has held high-ranking, albeit often meaningless, positions. The head of the supervisory board of Olympstroy, the Minister of Regional Development

national development, head of the commission on Transnistria or the North Caucasus. An acquaintance once described Kozak this way: "As a manager, he's completely empty. His only virtue, for which Putin drags him along, is

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"Kozak can shout loudly and look at you with a stern gaze *(he is a former special forces soldier - author's note).* Oh, and he hasn't really learned how to steal yet."381 Kozak probably lives not only on his official salary, but he has never been the subject of major journalistic investigations, and hasn't demonstrated a deliberate penchant for luxury or traveling abroad. Therefore, we attribute the billions of dollars spent by Olimp-Stroy to Kozak's incompetence rather than to his thieving.

cottoniness.

But Putin's other friends—the "Chekists," the "Petersburgers," and the "bandits"—made a killing on the Olympics. Arkady Rotenberg became the largest recipient of government contracts for the construction of Olympic venues. And Gennady Timchenko and Vladimir Yakunin (with the participation of the same Rotenberg) carried out a unique scam worthy of a textbook on corruption. It went like this. The most expensive project built for the Olympics was the Adler-Krasnaya Polyana highway and railway (it was needed to transport spectators to the upper part of the Olympic village, where the alpine skiing competitions were held).

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sports). The final construction costs are estimated at close to four billion dollars.382 There was something wrong with this route from the very beginning. Many asked why they were building a high-speed railway up there (in the end, high-speed trains will be removed from this route immediately after the Olympics, and regular trains will generate nothing but losses). And then, to appoint Russian Railways, a company that has connections to railways but understands nothing about regular ones, as Vladimir Putin would have responded to the public, as the builder of the combined route. Many were, of course, surprised, but in vain. Putin's close friend, Vladimir Yakunin, was the head of Russian Railways, and this was precisely the reason for receiving the huge contract. And why was the road designed in such a way that its cost increased every day? For example, why did they cut six large tunnels when they could have done without them?

idle citizens asked again. And then, in order to increase budget expenditures for this project, Putin seemed to answer, although, in theory, he should have been concerned with saving government spending. Russian Railways, which received the contract, ultimately achieved nothing.

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built. She subcontracted the first part of the contract to a firm with the forgettable name of Transinzhstroy. This is one of many companies secretly linked to Yakunin himself and his entourage. Having taken some of the money, he himself

Transinzhstroy has found a new subcontractor
Again, with the hard-to-pronounce name "Mosto-Trest." In fact, Mostotrest is the oldest infrastructure organization in Russia; it has built most of the country's famous bridges since Stalin's time. But this wasn't its main advantage; rather, in 2010, Arkady Rotenberg became Mostotrest's largest shareholder. They handled the second part of the huge state contract even more bluntly. Vladimir Yakunin awarded it, without a competitive bidding, to yet another company with a name that's hard to remember—SK Most. It also had a major advantage: in 2012, Gennady Timchenko became its shareholder. Incidentally, Timchenko will get rid of his stake immediately after the Olympics, arguing that the investment hadn't lived up to expectations. 383 This is Homerically ridiculous: a) Putin began overseeing the Olympics; b) his friends immediately became shareholders in the companies,

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who built these Olympics; c) Putin gave the state contract for the most expensive Olympic facility to his friend Yakunin, and he, taking part of the money, gave the same contract to other friends of the president; d) all the friends made a good profit, because the construction was financed smoothly from the budget (including by raising railway tariffs for the population); e) having enriched himself, Timchenko said that the investment did not work out. I wonder how, in his opinion, investments work then. When the Olympics are over, some of the private builders who erected the facilities for it will go bankrupt or be punished by the authorities for shortcomings. But not Timchenko, not Rotenberg, not Russian Railways.

However, Putin wouldn't be Putin if he didn't get something personally from the Olympics. Once again, he took it in square meters. A road was built to the top of the Psekhako mountain range, along a complex serpentine road. It leads to two luxurious chalets standing opposite each other. One of them, for Medvedev, was built with funds from the aforementioned "Dar" foundation. The second, registered to state-owned Gazprom,

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went to Putin. So both Russian leaders received a house where they could stay during a ski vacation.
season.

An important detail: Putin uses a chalet that
It doesn't belong to his proxies or offshore companies associated with him. This property is directly registered to a state-owned company. When Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, something had changed in him—at least as a corrupt official. It seemed he was no longer preparing for retirement outside the Kremlin—he now identified with the state and could use it at his own discretion. Of course, Putin didn't stop being a money-grubber; of course, the offshore companies previously created for him

Of course, the president's inner circle continued to exist, and they didn't stop enriching themselves. It's just that they were no longer just thieves, but rather the "red director" of Russia, who had taken over the entire enterprise.

How did the fates of the main characters in this chapter unfold? Krasnodar Krai, also known as Kuban, remains an important region of Russia: part elite vacation spot, part national breadbasket. Governor Tkachev left his post in 2015, after

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After working as the Minister of Agriculture, I have finally returned to my favorite pastime -
management of his multi-billion dollar agricultural business. He lost his government positions, of course, not because of the rampage of bandits or his own stupidity and opportunism. It's just that a more suitable candidate for the Kremlin was found in his place. Veniamin Kondratyev became the governor of Kuban; he had once been Tkachev's deputy, responsible for

in charge of control over the courts and property—that is, he oversaw, in effect, the two main problems of the Krasnodar Territory. It was Kondratyev who overlooked Judge Khakhaleva's outrages; it was Kondratyev who did everything to ensure that "respected people" were able to build their dachas in Kuban, regardless of any legal restrictions. A former colleague describes Kondratyev this way: "He

He took a very creative approach to the legal issues surrounding the construction of Putin's palace and the patriarch's dacha *(it's located in the same place as Putin's house - author's note).*
and other VIP objects. Most of the lands are related
They were heading towards a national park where it was impossible to build capital buildings, but Kondratyev made it so that it was possible”384. As a result, Kondratyev found himself in the

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We're raising the Kremlin's profile, just as Tkachev did before him when he pulled off the "Sudba" yacht scheme. It was precisely this man who was appointed governor of Kuban—a clear sign of the qualities the Kremlin values most in officials. Under Kondratyev, the region solidified its status as a corruption showroom. Here, in an area of 75,000 square meters, you can, like on a tour, witness all forms of theft and hypocrisy. This is a typical scene in Sochi, Adler, Anapa, and other coastal cities—thousands of so-called "self-built" settlements.

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Small businesses and ordinary citizens are building Apartments and summer houses for vacationers, ignoring safety and environmental requirements. Legally, none of this can exist. Garage and balcony extensions will collapse and bury people at the first natural or man-made disaster, but for a small bribe, anything goes. This scheme was also devised by Kondratyev. Here's how his former colleague describes it: "First, a homemade structure is built, and then retroactively it is legalized through a slick court." Another exhibit in our hall depicts corruption on a completely different scale. Putin's palace, the surrounding estates of the patriarch and Putin friend Gennady Timchenko, Tkachev's dacha, and many other super-expensive properties in Kuban. They are completely out of line.

We go to "illegal buildings," but the essence is still the same: if "respectable people" need something, they will get it.

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Patriarch Kirill's vast estate near Gelendzhik. Vineyards belonging to the head of the Russian Orthodox Church are also located nearby.

Ridovka Edition

The Tsapkis, or rather their heirs, haven't disappeared from Kuban either. When we told the story of Judge Khakhaleva, we deliberately didn't mention whose side she fought on in the war for the inheritance of Sergei Tsapok's gang. That businessman's name is Fyodor Streltsov. He was previously considered Tsapok's treasurer and, after the latter's

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using Khakhaleva's power to re-register his assets in the name of herself and other former accomplices.

The Winter Olympics in Sochi are also a full-fledged hero of this book. Although the competition ended with a spectacular spectacle on the evening of February 23, 2014, they remained a huge problem for a long time. We have already mentioned that planning the Olympics became Prime Minister Putin's main preoccupation. Few remembered that he had once refused to even participate in the competition for the right to host the Games. After 2008, officials and oligarchs perceived the Olympics as "Putin's personal project," each trying to please the tsar in their own way. As it later turned out, those most pleased were the security services and experts from the Russian Anti-Doping Agency. Together, they ensured the unprecedented success of the Russian Olympians (first place in the overall medal count, 33 medals of various grades in all disciplines). FSB agents tampered with urine samples from Russians implicated in doping, and the Anti-Doping Agency covered up the forgery.385 Putin could have been pleased: the Olympics were a riot, with Russian athletes thrashing foreigners.

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The only thing that marred the president’s appearance at the Sochi stadium was the events in Ukraine, which were unfolding simultaneously with the Games.

The most significant changes have occurred with the traffic police, a symbol of Russian bribery. Feigning a fight against corruption, the authorities renamed the militia (so

(previously, all law enforcement agencies were called) the police. It was implied that under the new name, law enforcement officers would become professional
official servants of the law, but they remained the same, in most cases, useless bribe-takers. This ridiculous reform was a symbol of the weak-willed rule of President Dmitry Medvedev. Rename the militia

and cancel the transition to winter time - this was the peak of his reformist fervor (the country returned to winter time in 2014, abandoning summer time, so there are questions about this reform of Medvedev's). The second change in the life of the traffic police was that, from some point on, inspectors disappeared from the streets, where they had previously extorted bribes from drivers en masse, leaving in their place thousands of video cameras to record

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Violation detection. Central Russia is currently one of the most heavily equipped areas in the world with traffic cameras. This would seem to be a step forward in the fight against corruption. In reality, however, the rights to install cameras are often obtained by companies affiliated with the police, and the money paid in fines is funneled through private firms. 386 So, the number of golden toilets in the homes of either police or militia officers has probably not diminished.

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7. Their style

How Putin and his entourage imagine a life of luxury

Russian autocrats knew a thing or two about luxury.
They ruled the country from the impressively magnificent chambers of the Moscow Kremlin, and later from the halls of the St. Petersburg Winter Palace. In the 20th century, the situation changed: beauty was not a priority for Soviet leaders. The Bolsheviks

It wasn't just churches that were attacked; they didn't spare the civil architecture of the past either. By the time the Soviet Union collapsed, the Kremlin's ancient Senate Palace, where the offices of the then leaders were located, was in a frankly poor state. As we've already mentioned, toilets were flushed with buckets of water. The situation was no better in the neighboring building, the 14th Kremlin building, built under Stalin, where President Boris Yeltsin temporarily moved in the early 1990s. His office didn't even have a private toilet, refrigerator, or television. Pavel Borodin, then the president's chief of staff, recalled his conversation with Yeltsin: "I remember on May 9th, we

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I went in with Barsukov *(Mikhail Barsukov, then the commandant of the Kremlin - author's note) ,* and there were some wretched multi-colored plates, metal forks and spoons, faceted glasses. I looked at all this and, unable to resist, said: "Boris Nikolayevich, presidents don't do this."

live.

“And how do they live, you know?”388

Borodin is hardly being disingenuous. Yeltsin then most likely truly didn't know how heads of state lived. For the nomenklatura of his generation, it was important to receive an apartment and a dacha from the state, which is what Russia's first president did. And what the state style of the new Russia looked like, no one probably understood back then. How could the Senate Palace be restored if the Bolsheviks had destroyed even the original plans? Borodin was sent to Europe to spy on Western models; he took with him the artist and former KGB agent Ilya Glazunov, who was favored by the state's attention. They made short films for Yeltsin—from London, Paris, and Rome—with the interiors of the palaces there. But the Russian president, who at that time

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He had traveled extensively abroad and was drawn to domestic, rather than foreign, designs. He wanted a decor reminiscent of 18th-century St. Petersburg (that is, in fact, in the spirit of the Italian-born architects who built buildings in the northern capital in various styles, from classical to baroque). As a result, while people across the country went months without receiving their salaries and pensions, the Kremlin began a large-scale renovation, which we have already written about. First, the Senate Palace, with its fully equipped presidential office, was furnished according to the model of St. Petersburg buildings. Later, the Grand Kremlin Palace was also restored—every state reception has been held in its gilded halls. Once, upon visiting Moscow, US President Bill Clinton exclaimed: "Is all this real? Is it really gold? And these people are asking us for money." The next generation of Russian leaders, led by Putin, no longer questioned how presidents lived. Firstly, the new head of state, while still working in St. Petersburg, saw how well the city's mayor lived—a huge

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Sobchak's luxurious apartment, complete with the aforementioned attic, was adorned with gilding, oak furniture, and numerous antiques. So Putin had plenty to look up to. Secondly, he himself had traveled extensively to France in the 1990s, bringing back a vision of the high life unknown not only to ordinary Russians but also to the Kremlin's staff. It all started with food. For decades, first Soviet and then Russian chefs pampered the elite with delicacies they understood—piglets in aspic, sturgeon, and game, picturesquely served with outspread wings. When Putin became president, the Kremlin chef asked the new leader what he could please him with. After a brief deliberation, the president requested scallops—a seafood popular in French cuisine but unfamiliar to most Russians at the time, including the Kremlin chef. Nevertheless, he pretended to understand his sovereign's wishes. The dish served apparently seemed to Putin

strange in taste, because the cook considered it necessary please clarify:

— Do you like scallops?

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- Yes, I like them, nothing special.

- Thank God you liked it, otherwise we slaughtered so many chickens.

Only at that moment did Putin realize that the Kremlin chef had no idea that scallops were
It's not just tasteless chicken combs, but also seafood delicacies. Of course, since then, the presidential chefs have made great strides in their knowledge and skills.

Tsarist architects also made the same progress. In the early 2000s, immediately after coming to power, the new president wanted to spend more time in the north, closer to his native St. Petersburg. So, in the state residence on the shores of Lake Valdai, three hundred kilometers from the northern capital, construction began on a new state dacha for Putin. He gave no specific instructions, so the architects hired to furnish everything to their own taste. The result is a relatively modern building in a high-tech style.

When a significant portion of the building was already completed, the president came to inspect it and, after walking through the premises, frankly said he wasn't thrilled with what he saw. Then, between the head of state

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and those responsible for the construction had a very short dialogue.

- And how would you like it?

— Just like in St. Petersburg...

Putin again avoided details. Those present were afraid to ask clarifying questions, and after the president's departure, they began to ponder what "like in St. Petersburg" meant. After a brief debate, they decided to use the Hermitage as a model, especially the Winter Palace, from which the Romanovs ruled Russia for several centuries. St. Petersburg specialists with experience in restoring the Hermitage were immediately invited to Valdai. We met one of them many years later—he invited us to visit him and, not without pride, showed us photographs. These were shots of Putin's Valdai residence as it had been created by St. Petersburg masters. Almost every piece of furniture in this three-story

The building screamed luxury.

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Valdai Presidential Residence, 2003

The chandeliers were especially ornate. The main one reached almost to the floor and was covered entirely in gold leaf and precious stones. The smaller light fixtures were also impressive—the chandelier in the lounge next to the hammam was shaped like a globe with glittering wafers hanging from it. The architect explained that these were gold leaf petals that the president and his guests could pluck while drinking expensive wine.

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The lounge in the Valdai residence. Literally everything is adorned with gold leaf—the table leg, the chairs, and the chandelier. Precious petals literally hang from the ceiling, so much so that Putin's guests can pick them off as souvenirs.

Putin loved inviting guests to his numerous residences, including the one in Valdai. It was a chance to impress with his wealth and discuss important matters. At the beginning of the Putin era, private parties became popular among Russia's nouveau riche, where they would fly in big-name pop stars for exorbitant prices. The country's president was no stranger to this fashion. The press published...

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There were stories from artists about secret parties at Valdai.393 We will cite the most interesting testimony – that of the Russian singer Natalia Vetlitskaya.394 Incidentally, Vetlitskaya never mentioned

the president's name, limiting herself to the brief "tsar." This title, which we put on the cover, is not at all a metaphor: a significant part of his court, and even ordinary subjects, really does call Putin a tsar, about which we will tell something amusing near the end of the book. This happened during Putin's second presidential term. His Valdai dacha was not intended for concerts at the time. The stage and

dressing room were set up in one of the halls created for other purposes. Nevertheless, everything was organized as stylishly as possible – like in Hollywood films about secret societies. Putin and his five guests – all without companions! – dressed in tailcoats. After the concert, which lasted several hours, the performers were lined up in the hall for the audience to pay for the performance. Vetlitskaya received diamond earrings, her colleagues - who

some people have a mantel clock, and some have an icon in an expensive one

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frame. The recipient of the icon, in a drunken stupor, approached Putin with a seditious, but logical in that situation, request: let the Tsar autograph the holy image. However, the crowning glory of this cinematic

party was the performance of Philip Kirkorov, whom the press at that time called the king of Russian pop. 395 In the end, *the Tsar* presented *the King with*

a large lacquered box. The artist froze in anticipation of a rich gift, and his colleagues, apparently not without envy, assumed that inside the box—
A golden crown befitting Kirkorov's title. However, upon seeing the contents, Kirkorov's expression changed, and Vetlitskaya whispered, "This is fucking nuts." Inside was a travel set for playing cards. It turned out the ruler was joking. Putin immediately asked for the real gift—

a certificate signed by the president's hand conferring upon Kirkorov the title of People's Artist of Russia.

Two facts are worth paying special attention to. Firstly, the rulers of post-communist Russia clearly appealed to the imperial past of the state - at least externally.

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with the appearance of their homes and offices. "Like in St. Petersburg," uttered by Yeltsin and Putin, meant precisely this. When Putin's successor architects built him a huge palace in Gelendzhik, about which we've already told you a lot, they unhesitatingly placed the Tsar's double-headed eagle on the gates, the same one on the Hermitage fence.

This eagle appears in a scene from the Soviet film "October." In this scene, revolutionary sailors storm the Winter Palace, the "stronghold of tsarism." At the entrance to Putin's palace in Gelendzhik

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It was precisely this eagle that hung, which added historical ambiguity to the decor.

Director Sergei Eisenstein, Grigori Alexandrov, 1927

The penchant for copying imperial palaces quickly overtook Putin's inner circle. Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller recreated the tsars' luxurious residence, Peterhof Palace, in the Moscow region, leading the media to nickname the copy "Millerhof." The Rotenberg brothers also built similarly styled palaces near Moscow—first by the one considered the smarter, and then, after looking at their relative, by the noticeably dumber one. And businessman Sergei Vasiliev, who knew Putin well during his gangster youth in the 1990s, built a garish replica of the Catherine Palace (the residence of the Russian empresses) in his native village of Vyritsa, near St. Petersburg. It looked incongruous: a blue palace with stucco, vases, and gilding, next to barracks housing ordinary people.

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Above is the palace of Sergei Vasiliev, below is the original - Catherine Palace

KulikovaTV/ Wikipedia; Alex “Florstein” Fedorov/ Wikipedia

The second fact that should not be overlooked is that Putin and his elite quickly learned the rule - hide their lifestyle, wealth, and even hobbies from others. The ice arena near that very palace in Gelendzhik was literally built underground for Putin— so he could peacefully kick the puck around without worrying about someone

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learns of its location (another secret skating rink was organized in the Moscow region396). In this secret world, everything was allowed that was forbidden in the open world. For example, next to the stage for variety performances in the Gelendzhik palace, there was a striptease room and gambling tables. Casinos were then banned by Russian law almost everywhere—except for certain territories of the country, which, of course, did not include Putin's palace (we found mini-casinos at other presidential leisure facilities, even at his state dacha in Valdai397). Over time, secrecy took on the features of paranoia. The Russian president wanted no one to guess where he was. How

How can this be done if the head of state must periodically appear in front of television cameras in his office? A solution was found: completely identical offices were built in his residences located throughout the country. So, if they say on TV that Putin works in his Novo-Ogarevo residence near Moscow, it doesn't mean anything. Because exactly

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The same interior was recreated, for example, in his Sochi residence “Bocharov Ruchey”398.

Putin's servants have adopted the same habits. The president's "consigliere," Yuri Kovalchuk, has followed in his boss's footsteps and become very secretive. As an influential man, he receives many gifts. If Kovalchuk were an official, he would be obliged to hand them over to the state. If he were an honest businessman, he could proudly display them. But the president's "consigliere" is neither. He doesn't even hold a government position.

Perhaps only the Honorary Consul General of the Kingdom of Thailand in St. Petersburg (we'll comment on this later). Therefore, he carefully hides all gifts. In a remote village between St. Petersburg and Finland, Kovalchuk built a museum of himself—there, away from prying eyes, he keeps his personal ostentatious room. Ordinary citizens, of course, can't buy tickets to this museum, but it's there they could see what gifts are traditionally given to important people in Russia: a Mercedes car and bicycle, a tricycle, expensive furniture, or, for example, a hockey jersey with his surname embroidered in Latin—Kovalchuk399.

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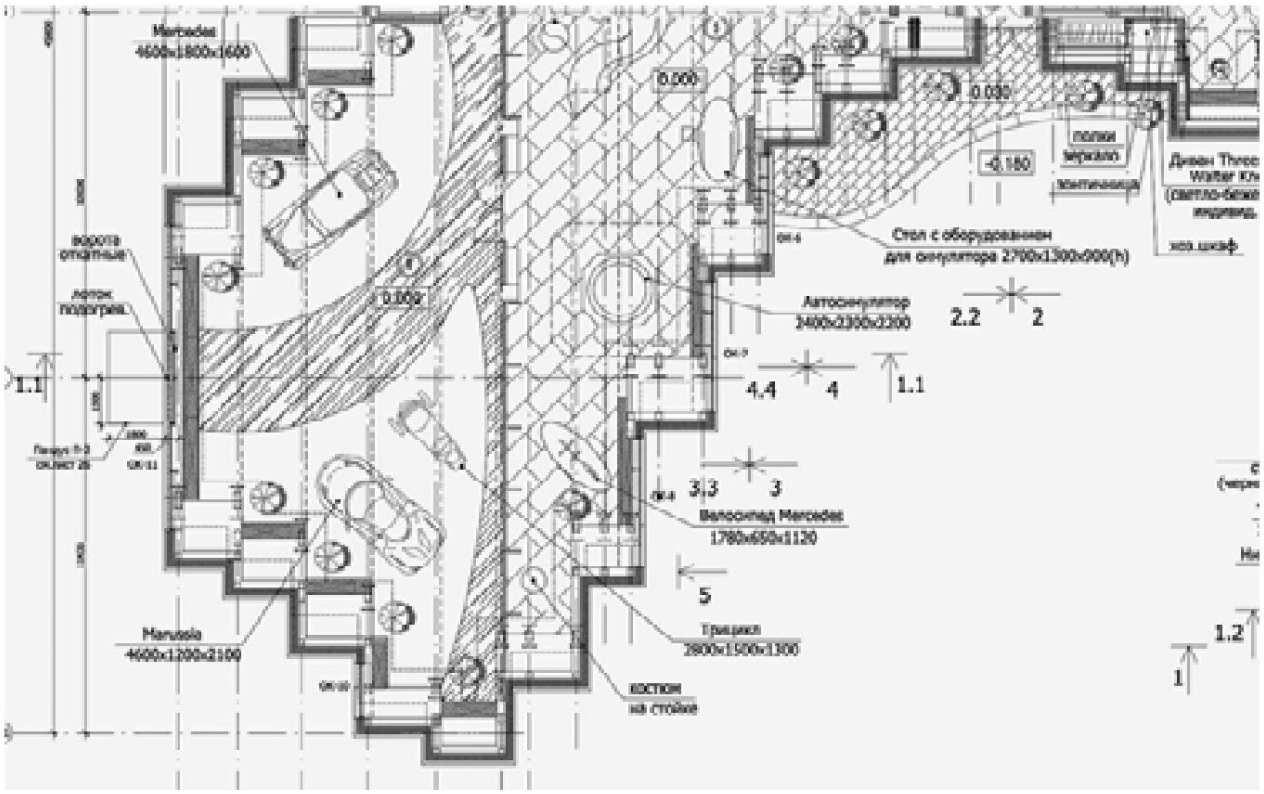

One of the builders400 gave us a map of the museum, which shows how Kovalchuk's gifts were arranged.

"Project"

This Putin nobleman has another characteristic weakness in everyday life. He is meticulously conservative in his choice of objects that surround him in everyday life. Everything that will be said below is based on the story of a former employee of Kovalchuk, who, together with his colleagues, was responsible for supplying his numerous residences.401 Yes , the presidential "consigliere" has an entire department whose task is to supply the same set of items to his four residences: in Val-

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even in Gelendzhik, where Kovalchuk, as we mentioned, lives next door to the president, as well as near Vyborg and at the Igora resort (both near St. Petersburg). The work of the employees in this department is not easy – they constantly have to search for old styles of a wide variety of things that Kovalchuk has become accustomed to over the course of his 70-plus years of life. For example, he likes the premium clothing brand Paul&Shark, but satisfying his whim is not easy, because

That one must seek out the outdated collections that Kovalchuk once began wearing and has loved ever since. Furthermore, every home must have Marlboro Red Label cigarettes, produced in the USA, and Kent cigarettes, made exclusively in Switzerland, a Versace ashtray, a Dunhill lighter, and Listerine mouthwash with alcohol—that's the only way. Once, when Lithuanian cigarettes were brought in instead of Swiss Kent cigarettes, Kovalchuk noticed the substitution and ordered the offending product thrown out. Another time, the "consigliere" couldn't find the required Listerine in one of his mansions, and the entire supply department was on alert the next morning. But don't think Kovalchuk limits himself to small details. In 2018

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The suppliers were looking for a children's snowmobile, and already in 2021, when the unknown child grew up,
a smaller version of the prestigious Aston Martin sports car with a 125 cc engine. The years of purchase are important in this case, because at that time Putin's grandson Roman Faassen, who is a racing enthusiast, was growing up. They were looking for supplies

women and a children's railway the size of a room and costing several tens of thousands of euros—something similar we saw in Putin's palace in Gelendzhik. Now is the time to return to the statement with which we

began our story about Kovalchuk: his life is inseparable from Putin's. At the beginning of every summer, the president makes a point of going to his native St. Petersburg, where he participates in an economic forum that is important for his image. For the organiza-

These are challenging days for the event organizers, but not only for them. About 150 kilometers to the northwest, almost on the border with Finland, preparations are also underway for Putin's possible arrival. Here, near Vyborg, stands an early 20th-century villa that was once used to film a Soviet film about Sherlock Holmes. In the 2010s, these places took

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The villa was originally placed under FSO protection, but was bought by structures connected to Putin's friends, including Kovalchuk . They restored the villa and simultaneously built a modern mansion nearby. They did this not to develop tourism near Vyborg, but so that Putin (and, apparently, Kovalchuk, the rest of the time) could visit. When the president attends a forum in St. Petersburg, the villa is prepared "just in case"—in case Putin wants to stop by. And then, it's imperative to change the batteries in the entire house to ensure all appliances are working properly when the head of state arrives. Kovalchuk's supplier, who agreed to speak with us, also handled these batteries.

Of course, the money for all these purchases Koval-
Chuk hides his secrets no less carefully than the gifts he receives. For this, an elegant and shameless solution was devised, which deserves a separate story. At the very beginning of Putin's reign, several important people from

His entourage became honorary consuls of various (usually poor) countries in St. Petersburg. Among the consuls, for example, were Yuri Kovalchuk, Sergei Fursenko, and Gennady Timchenko.

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and many others. Journalists have been laughing at this quirk of Putin's courtiers for years, but in vain. These men needed consular work for a specific purpose. The office of the honorary consul and its
housing is protected by limited legal immunity403. This fact allows the same Kovalchuk to store in the consulate of the Kingdom of Thailand
Land cash for all the purchases described above. Our interlocutor received money for batteries and American cigarettes there.

In the center of St. Petersburg, on Manezhnaya Square next to the Russian Museum, there is a beautiful three-story building—ancient, but in perfect condition. The ground floor is occupied by the Honorary Consulate of Serbia, headed by Putin's friend Gennady Timchenko. He also owns the entire building. But on the upper floors is the enormous apartment of Yuri Kovalchuk (in turn, the consul of Thailand). 404 In other words, this building is protected by double immunity—both as a residence and as an office for diplomatic workers. For added security. The story of the consular titles says a lot about how Putin's circle began—these people were once

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People, it seems, weren't as confident in their own inviolability as they are now. Immunity didn't seem unnecessary to them, nor did red diplomatic license plates on cars for protection from traffic police, and the tax breaks granted to diplomatic workers didn't seem like nonsense either. There was a time. Incidentally, the idea of formalizing consular status for his comrades could have been suggested by Putin himself.

The fact is that, while in charge of foreign relations at the St. Petersburg mayor's office, he oversaw, among other things, the property of foreign missions in St. Petersburg (this was handled by the company "Inpredservis"). Other wealthy Russians, having spied on the know-how of Putin's friends, also became honorary consuls of third countries in godforsaken provincial Russian towns, one after another. If you look at the current list of consuls, you'll find dozens of Russian billionaires, their relatives, or proxies. Many of them sponsor Putin and his wild schemes, but other countries—whether for money or through oversight—don't revoke their diplomatic credentials.

To finish with Kovalchuk, let's add something good. In contrast to the overwhelming

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Like most of Putin's confidantes, he's not a fan of the "St. Petersburg" style—he prefers modernism, including some rather attractive ones. For example, that very same gift museum is a complete copy of a modern building—the Malaysian Pod Pavilion, nicknamed the "cocoon" for its distinctive shape.

The Kovalchuk Gift Museum in the village of Koloskovo, Leningrad Oblast, is known locally as "the larva."

Investigation Management Center

There is another important person in Putin's circle with his own, somewhat unique, ideas about style. He comes from

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Sergey Shoigu, the head of Tuva. He is known to own at least two residences, and neither of them is designed "like the ones in St. Petersburg." Both buildings are constructed in a pseudo-Asian style.

Sergei Shoigu's house on Rublevo-Uspenskoe Highway near Moscow

Putin's own style has been declining over the years. His palace in Gelendzhik—
the archetypal architectural alter ego of its owner. This palace is becoming more and more imperial—both outside and inside. The peak of its latest renovation came at a time when Putin was preparing and waging war with Ukraine. He seems to have fallen victim to his own hypocrisy, believing

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in their "mission." The Russian emperors had, among other luxuries, a house church, numerous historical paintings, and, of course, a throne right in the Winter Palace. After the renovation, all of this appeared in Putin's palace. Paintings

One of the rooms depicts exclusively battles, bloody and grim. The painting, which features a particularly large number of bloody corpses, is called "How Long, O Lord?"406

The stasidia, or throne, in the church of Putin's Gelendzhik palace. It's unclear whether the president himself or visiting clergy sit here.

Visualization of the «Project»

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Of the heroes in this chapter, the most revealing fate awaited Pavel Borodin and his department. The first Kremlin chief of staff of the new Russia is a fascinating figure. Absolutely everyone we've spoken to about Borodin over the course of our careers has repeated this as an axiom: he's a thief of thieves. A surprising unanimity from both Putin's supporters and opponents. Remember that Borodin was Putin's first boss in Moscow, the man who showed him how things were done in the capital.

Having completed the Kremlin renovations and avoided prosecution in the Mabetex case—not without Putin's help—Borodin soon found himself behind bars. Not in Russia, however, but in the United States, where he had traveled to attend the inauguration of President George W. Bush. Despite such a serious pretext, the Americans detained the Russian official at the request of Switzerland, which was investigating its own bribery case during the Kremlin renovation. Moscow made unprecedented efforts to secure Borodin's release—a media campaign was launched in his defense, and the government posted bail for the official in the amount of three million dollars.

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ditch, after which the Kremlin's quartermaster went home. However, upon

returning home, Borodin stopped working as the Presidential Property Management Director. Putin appointed an even more important man to this responsible position—a former Komsomol member.

Vladimir Kozhin, the leader of Leningrad. Numerous journalistic investigations indicate that he was hardly a less corrupt official than Borodin. But he was certainly even more agile. Under him, the Kremlin administration became a state within a state—multi-billion-dollar government contracts for repairs, construction, medical care, food, and so on were distributed without any public oversight among businessmen connected to Kozhin.407 He ended up in much the same way as Borodin. Kozhin also decided to carry out another renovation of the Kremlin. This time, the reconstruction affected the 14th building—

The very same one where Yeltsin's temporary office, without any amenities, was once set up. The renovations were unsuccessful: they tried to bring the building back to life for 13 years, and after numerous construction failures, Putin ordered its demolition. And the new management...

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In 2014, he made Alexander Kolpakov, his own security guard, the head of his affairs. A thief was replaced by a bully. This was a natural stage in the evolution of the agency in which Putin began his distinguished career. After all, a time of fear and cruelty was dawning in Russia.

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Part Four

KINDNESS AND COURAGE

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1. The Boy and the Rat

Why does Vladimir Putin fight?

It was 1972, spring or summer. In Leningrad it was
It was warm, and young girls and boys were strolling the streets, meeting new people and having fun as best they could. Young N. also went for a walk with a friend. The girls were 14 years old and attended school, but sometimes, without their parents' knowledge, they would sneak off for an evening stroll. Beforehand, they would do their hair and put on makeup to look older than their years. One day, the girls met a couple of guys: they were about 20 years old, they were involved in wrestling and were on their way to watch a sambo competition. The friends remembered the first guy as tall, humorous, and talkative; "in a word, they both fell in love with him." The second guy was "short and plain."

He kept aloof, "had a complex, or something." The conversation didn't last long. After the competition,
which the ladies didn't like, all four went to see one of the schoolgirls home. The whole way, only the tall and attractive one spoke, while the second one remained silent almost the entire time. Already at the house, they began to agree on the next...

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On a real date. At that moment, the short guy finally decided to show off. He said to H., "Let me show you a trick," and without waiting for an answer, he threw her over his hip. To the suitor's credit, he prevented H. from falling to the ground, catching her with his hands just in time. H. was still hurt, and she was frightened. The girls quickly said goodbye and never saw the wrestlers again —or at least, that's what they thought until a certain moment. H. eventually became a well-known journalist, covering politics in the new democratic Russia. In the early 1990s, for example, she wrote about the new leadership of St. Petersburg. One of the deputy mayors seemed familiar to her, and after some time, an old, unpleasant story surfaced in her memory. The guy who once threw her over his hip for no apparent reason was Vladimir Putin.

Now N. lives in another country and recalls this story with almost constant laughter. She asks, however, not to use her name, because, besides laughter, there is also fear. We will talk about it a lot in this part of the book. When asked what, in her opinion, pushed the young athlete to act aggressively, N. answers: probably a complex.

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vanity and jealousy—towards those more gifted or fortunate. We know that such conclusions resemble amateur psychoanalysis, but we also know one ironclad fact. Every single recollection of Putin's childhood and youth, left in any form by either his admirers or his critics, *contains scenes of violence.* With this phrase, borrowed from film distributors, we literally described this. *"I still remember that fight. Either he [Putin] didn't give way to the older kids. Or he demanded that they apologize for something. But the kids beat Volodka badly, and since he was small and frail, he couldn't fight back. The next day, he signed up for a sports club. And for some reason, from then on, he became more withdrawn and silent."* These are the recollections of Putin's school friend, Nikolai Krylov. Then this story—about how Putin became a fighter in order not to let himself be offended anymore—was interpreted by nomads in various ways.

shaft according to many presidential memoirs.

Petr Tarkhanov, who trained with Putin and Arkady Rotenberg in the sambo section,

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He recalls an episode the teenagers experienced in the company of their criminal trainer, Leonid Usvyatsov (we talked about him in detail in Part Two): *"We were riding on a tram or a bus, with this Leonid Ionovich, and someone hands him three kopecks for a ticket. He grabs [the person] by the wrist, yanks him, and he falls right at the entrance on his butt. Next time, he says, you'll buy the ticket yourself."410*

These are the memoirs published in 2002 in the newspaper Pravda Severa, signed by Viktor Kolbin, the father of Pyotr Kolbin, who, as we wrote, became the president's silent figurehead. Viktor's son once frolicked with a young Putin during the holidays in the village of Bolshaya Pustomerzha near Leningrad: *"One day, Petka, my son, and I went to a dance in a neighboring village. Someone approached Petka. My son is not a weakling—he slapped him on the back of the neck. The dance hosts stood up for the local and started beating Petka. Volodya commanded, 'Petka, into the corner,' and beat up five of them by himself. He was already into wrestling by then."411*

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The same thing, but even more clearly, is said about Putin by his school teacher Vera Gurevich, whose memoirs are scattered across several official biographies of the Tsar:

— Did he have to fight in this yard?

- He could fight anywhere if he was pestered!412

Here's a tragic episode from a book by Oleg Blotsky, who clearly admires the president, as told to him by Putin's friends: *In his first year at university <…>*

Putin made a new friend – Volodya Cheremushkin. <…> At university, Cheremushkin began training in the sambo section. In the spring of 1973, from March 14th to 16th, the Leningrad University Sambo Championship was held. One of Cheremushkin's matches ended tragically. Essentially, this is a coaching error, trying to force an unprepared athlete onto the mat to score points, to get at least some kind of result. So they sent Cheremushkin in from the university. And while performing, he performed a bad grab and hit his head on the mat. <…>

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Unfortunately, he died a few days or the day after. Of course, Volodya was very upset. He was dejected, upset, heartbroken. Putin even intended to bring the issue of his friend's death to the attention of the physical education department. He wanted those responsible to be punished. His friends didn't recognize him; he was so serious and distant. It seemed as if Putin didn't notice anyone or anything around him. <…> When no one was left in the cemetery except us, Putin suddenly burst into tears over the grave and cried for a very long time. The three of us couldn't calm him down. <…> This was probably the first time Volodya, as an adult, cried .

However, the most symbolic scene
The story of a rat, told by Putin himself, became the catalyst for violence.

"I was just walking down these very stairs and saw a rat. I started chasing it, cornered it somewhere. It turned around and ran after me. And not just ran, it even jumped from staircase to staircase, from flight to flight—it tried to jump on my head. Everyone should keep this in mind: it's better not to corner anyone."

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This naturalistic sketch appears in the first printed and first televised biography of the president—the book "First Person" (2000) and Andrei Kondrashov's film "Putin" (2018). Putin and his PR people clearly like this story; they attach some kind of importance to it. At the same time, they themselves seem to be unaware of its significance. In all previous stories about the violence during Putin's youth, various interpreters have always emphasized the meaning they wanted. Putin's supporters showed that the young leader had been through trials and never gave anyone a break. Critics saw in these episodes resentment, vindictiveness, and a penchant for violence. But what can you emphasize in a story about a rat?! Did Putin identify himself with that rat and want to tell them not to bother him again? Did Putin identify others with rats? Who—

ordinary people, friends, enemies, the West? Then who is Putin? The one who chases an innocent animal and expects natural aggression in response? Any of these options looks, to put it mildly, unhealthy. Just like the story of the young girl N. thrown over the hip. All the cases cited here

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Memories, including Putin's own words about the rat, testify to one thing: violence and even death, insults, bullying, and communication problems were regular occurrences in his presidential youth and likely affected him directly. He was prepared to use force in response to insults, real or imagined, and he hid his emotions, which later spilled out in ways that weren't always normal. Even in 2023, explaining the reasons for the aggression against Ukraine, Putin flaunted his resentment: "Our so-called partners simply deceived us, as they say—simply screwed us."415

Of course, the level of violence in society in the years when Putin was coming of age was generally much higher than it is now, and everywhere, not just in the Soviet Union.416 But life in the USSR had its unpleasant features: the communist authorities often hid the facts of crimes and information about them, especially when

The talk was about violence, as the party proclaimed, which was impossible under the Soviet system - for example, about violence on sexual, national, religious, and sometimes property grounds. This is

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led to the logical result—unsolved cases, or, in the language of Soviet detectives, "cold cases," began to multiply. After all, you can't effectively fight something that doesn't exist! In 1995, Russian filmmakers began filming the first popular domestic television series —

"Streets of Broken Lights." It depicted the daily life of the St. Petersburg police in the 1990s. The visual quality of the series was so poor that central channels initially refused to air it. However, the content, by all accounts, so accurately reflected the spirit of the era that the entire country watched "Streets of Broken Lights" with rapture. The screenwriter was a retired detective, former head of the police department for investigating murders, Andrei Kivinov. In other words, the author knew exactly what he was writing about. In almost every episode, the police officers complained about their daily work routine: they worried that the crime they were investigating would turn into another cold case, also known as a "cold case." In other words, cold cases were on the agenda as a very big problem. According to the laws of drama, film operas are eventually solved.

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They do everything they can, no matter what the cost. But in real life, it wasn't always like that. The Soviet, and later Russian, militia (later the police) used a vicious method of dealing with "cold cases" - the so-called "stick system." It works like this: the police authorities, in order to

Positive statistics demonstrating successful crime control are needed to report to the top, and commanders pass down the numbers of arrests required of them to lower-level officers. As a result, the operatives adjust the results to meet the standards, investigate

It's not serious and complex cases that are being investigated, but rather a multitude of minor ones, including fictitious ones, and sometimes people are sent to prison simply for the sake of it. This, in turn, breeds even greater distrust of law enforcement agencies and the authorities in general. Thus, one of the most amusing sociological phenomena in Russia was born. Society simultaneously considers its own penal system (the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the special services, the prosecutor's office, and the courts) ineffective, but, remembering the experience of brutal and widespread repression, believes in the secret capabilities of domestic secret services. People in uniform cannot protect citizens.

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in everyday life—and at the same time, capable of the most cunning and treacherous operations. It sounds strange, but that's exactly what many Russians think. Type "FSB in..." into any search engine. You'd think people could search for anything, for example, the phrase "FSB in Moscow"—and in over 80 other regions. But no. Almost all the most popular search queries include the phrase "FSB Blows Up Russia." That's the title of a book by Soviet-born American historian Yuri Felshtinsky and former FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko (we've covered him before), written over 20 years ago. The book was banned in Russia, its print runs were stopped at the border and destroyed, and Litvinenko, as you already know, was brutally murdered by Russian intelligence services. Why, after all these years, are people still trying to find out the contents of this book? It's unlikely that the ban is the only factor driving interest. It's just that many see oddities and inexplicable details in the horrific crime that brought Putin to power. We're talking about the bombing of apartment buildings in Russian cities in 1999, just when the decrepit Yeltsin was secretly

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offered young Putin to become his successor
nobody.

As we begin this section, we find ourselves in a difficult situation. We will now be confronted with tragic, even monstrous, events—
like the apartment building bombings. Our protagonist, Vladimir Putin, was involved in these events in one way or another. Right now, as we write these lines, we are also working as part of a group of journalists investigating another event of the same kind—the death in custody of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Perhaps we will learn the circumstances of this crime before we publish the book. Or perhaps it will happen much later, years from now. But until that happens, Alexei's death will remain yet another cold case, a crime about which much is clear except the main one —who committed it and how exactly. The same is true for many of the crimes described below: these are cold cases—murders, terrorist attacks, kidnappings, beatings—the exact circumstances of which are still unknown (or we have reason to doubt the officially announced ones). Now, while Putin

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in power, the secret service archives are closed, and repression is rampant across the country, neither we nor other journalists can find a solution to these crimes. Nevertheless, one day it will happen, and someone will definitely write a new book about it. But the very existence of cold cases is the most important characteristic of the past 25 years of Russian history. It so happens that Putin's rule, from the very first day, has been associated with the death and suffering of others, and the perpetrators have not been found. You can accuse us of conspiracy theories—

It's as if we're trying to hold Putin and his people responsible for crimes they had nothing to do with. First, we'll rely solely on the facts and avoid unfounded conclusions. Second, there was at least one person whose life and death 100% proved the main thing: Putin and his henchmen are capable of extreme cruelty; they can kill in the most monstrous manner and stage the incident so that no one would suspect them. This person's name was Alexei Navalny; he was our friend and the only Russian politician who, until recently, could challenge Putin to a fair fight.

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elections. In February 2024, Alexei died in prison, where he was placed on trumped-up charges. And even earlier, in August 2020,

was poisoned by FSB officers using the secret organophosphorus poison Novichok. The investigation conducted by journalist Hristo Grozev

The investigation has clearly established the FSB's involvement in the assassination attempt. One of the officers who carried out the operation directly confirmed this in a phone conversation—when Navalny himself, having recovered from the poisoning, called him under the guise of an orderly for Nikolai Patrushev, the FSB officer closest to Putin at the time. If the security services clearly attempted to kill an innocent man in 2020, then why couldn't they have done the same (this time successfully) in 2024 or on dozens of other occasions throughout Putin's political career? They could have, and quite likely did. We'll tell you about it.

And don't forget about Patrushev. In the coming chapters, you'll get a close-up look at this man's unsavory life.

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2. Crime and impunity

How Putin's first blood was spilled

It so happens that Leningrad, also known as St. Petersburg, where many of the characters in our book, including the main one, were born and raised, is often associated in the minds of Russians with crime and cruelty. Many attribute this to irrational reasons—the gloomy weather, seemingly conducive to equally gloomy deeds, and the “bad heredity” of the city, where Fyodor Dostoevsky’s characters once suffered and sinned. We used a modified title from one of his novels in the chapter title, but not because we believe in the mystical nature of St. Petersburg. Its criminal history is explained by entirely material reasons. Leningrad was a huge, densely populated city with slightly less

tighter supervision by law enforcement agencies than in the capital Moscow. It was noticeably more
social stratification between natives and newcomers, which always provokes crime. But most importantly, Leningrad is

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A window to Europe, a border with capitalism and the Western way of life. Since Soviet times, the city has been teeming with foreigners and the money they brought with them. It boasts a seaport, an international airport, several train stations, numerous factories, including those producing scarce goods, a customs office, and prestigious museums. All of this has contributed to the growth of a wide variety of criminal activities—from illegal prostitution and underground currency transactions to smuggling and art counterfeiting.

"In our country there are no rich or poor. We are all workers," these words, spoken with mockery, belong to the main character of the popular Soviet film "The Golden Mine"420. The hero himself is a charming but cruel bandit from Leningrad, where the film is set. This

It is also indicative: decade after decade, the plots of Russia's most popular crime films and TV series take place in Leningrad and St. Petersburg (and they are also filmed there). "The Golden Mine" in the 70s, "Intergirl" (about illegal prostitution) in the 80s, "The Streets of

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"Broken Lanterns" (incidentally, some episodes of this series were directed by the same director who filmed "Golden Mine" during the Soviet era) in the 1990s, and finally, "Bandit Petersburg" in the 2000s. The latter series is truly emblematic of the times. Its title has become a catchphrase for Russia's second capital, and almost all the characters are based on real historical figures who will appear in this chapter. Furthermore, "Bandit Petersburg" stars real-life bandits as themselves, including Roman Tsepov, the very same Putin bodyguard who will later be killed in a sophisticated and brutal manner.

Alongside the criminal underworld, Leningrad also had a vibrant intellectual scene. In the 1980s, an informal circle of economic theorists emerged and grew in the city. With the fall of the Soviet Union, many of its members would gain a chance to become practitioners—they would occupy high positions in the government, the Kremlin, and academia. The circle was led by Anatoly Chubais, who, starting in 1990, would spend more than 30 years linking his career with the state—he worked in the Leningrad and later federal governments, the Kremlin, and the state.

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companies. One of the circle's participants was Andrei Illarionov, future advisor to the pre-
resident on economic issues, whom we introduced you to in one of the previous chapters. Another member of the circle was Mikhail Manevich, a native of Leningrad from what was then called a "good Jewish family": his father was a professor of economics. Mikhail himself also studied to be an economist - his main area of academic interest was issues of management and property. Under the Soviet Union, the monopoly on both power and property

The state owned the property, but everything began to change in the early 1990s. It was then that two worlds—the criminal and the intellectual—met.

"My former associates *(from the economics circle – author's note) called.* They said they now have a new colleague. A certain Putin. They say he worked in the KGB, but don't get the wrong idea. He's our man!" This is how Illarionov recalls the moment when he first learned from his acquaintances the name of the future president of Russia.421 In 1990, Chubais, Manevich, and some other economists came to work for the Leningrad government, where

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Putin turned out to be one, and they became colleagues for years to come. It was probably easier for economists to accept the KGB agent as one of their own due to the fact that young Alexei Miller, a member of the economics circle that included Manevich and Illarionov, worked as Putin's assistant.

Vladimir Putin, Anatoly Sobchak, Anatoly Chubais, Sobchak's wife Lyudmila Narusova, Sergei Tsyplyaev (presidential representative in St. Petersburg), Mikhail Manevich (behind him) mayor) and numerous security guards during the election 1996 campaign.

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Finally, another memorable representative of the Leningrad executive power at that time, in 1990, was a man named Yuri Shutov. He and Putin occupied almost identical positions in 1990.

Current positions: assistant and advisor to the head of the Leningrad City Council, Anatoly Sobchak.

Shutov is older than his colleagues in Sobchak's office. In the 1970s, he also worked, so to speak, in the economic field—in the Leningrad Department of Statistics, and as a result of his work, he had a good understanding of the weaknesses of the Soviet economy. 422 One of these weaknesses was the ease with which state property was stolen. This was the work of the numerous thieves we discussed in the previous section. Shutov himself became a thieves: he and his partners stole substantial stocks of chain-link fencing, a commodity in great shortage in the USSR. Furthermore, he falsified construction contracts and embezzled funds allocated for the work. When it came to searches at Shutov's place of work, the thieves started three fires at once—

at a country base where, as they said then, “material assets” were stored, in the archives of the statistical office and in one of the offices

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The Smolny Palace, where the city government was then, as it is now. This was no small matter—the arson of a building from which Vladimir Lenin once led the October Revolution. In the Soviet Union, such an act could have led to a long prison sentence. Shutov was sentenced to five years in a labor camp; he was released in the second half of the 1980s. Prison did not cure him of either his pyromania (fire would play a significant role in his life) or his eccentricity. In 1990, the former statistician and prisoner became the subject of the country's leading magazine. Ogonyok, essentially the printed organ of perestroika, wrote a programmatic article about Shutov, "Fire at the Headquarters of the Revolution."

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ПОЖАР В ШТАБЕ РЕВОЛЮЦИИ

Андрей БЕНЮХ,
Марк ГРИГОРЬЕВ

ДЕЛО О ПОДЖОГЕ
В СМОЛЬНОМ

Следователь-криминалист прокуратуры города Валентина Константиновна Корнилова и механик строительного треста Юрий Титович Шутов менее 10 лет назад оказались по разным берегам Невы: Шутов — на Выборгской стороне, в одиночной камере печально знаменитой тюрьмы «Кресты», а Корнилова — на левом берегу, в следственной части прокуратуры. Сообщим сразу читателям, что Шутов поселился почти на три года в «Крестах» не по собственному, а по Валентины Константиновны желанию. Для исполнения желания было достаточно пяти слов: «Мера пресечения — содержание под стражей».
Но, как пел Высоцкий, все позади — и КПЗ, и суд... Теперь бы следовало

ТИХИЕ АППАРАТНЫЕ ИГРЫ

Ogonyok magazine, No. 12, March 1990

The episode described in the article is the same fire at Smolny, started by Shutov. But the meaning was the exact opposite: the article presented Shutov as a hero of democratic convictions, slandered and imprisoned by party bosses. Shutov knew how to "envelop his interlocutors," as a then-acquaintance put it: "He was a brilliant actor." Mark Grigoriev, the co-author of the text in Ogonyok, also fell victim to his acting. His brief fascination with Shutov set off an irreversible chain of horrors.

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the most important events, as a result of which most of the heroes of this chapter will go to the next world.

So, it's 1990. Shutov, the hero of Ogonyok, gets a job with Sobchak—for a small salary of 75 rubles. Putin also works for Sobchak. Shutov was primarily responsible for his St. Petersburg boss's dirty political strategies. In essence, he created a new profession in Russia—the "TV killer," a reporter who destroys others' reputations to order. A young journalist named Alexander Nevzorov, just beginning to gain popularity, was working for Leningrad television at the time. He and Shutov became unofficial partners: the politician fed the reporter high-rating stories, in exchange for career benefits. For example, Sobchak, Shutov's boss, ran into trouble with democratic deputies in the Leningrad City Council. Nevzorov aired a TV spot where treacherous deputies, depicted as rats, attacked the city's symbol, the Bronze Horseman, made of chocolate. Sobchak's enemies were ridiculed. The day before filming, Shutov himself brought lab rats to the studio, smeared them with dark gouache, and after the recording, they sat down with a couple of

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Shutov, along with Nevzorov, killed them with blows from a stick.425 In a word, Shutov was a resourceful man. Sobchak's office soon realized that even they couldn't tolerate such a scoundrel. Shutov was fired—and then he fell out with Sobchak and Putin forever. He probably also quarreled with Manevich, who at some point was responsible for the privatization of state enterprises in the city government. And Shutov began to take revenge. The first victim was the unfortunate journalist Mark Grigoriev, who had once fallen under the spell of a pi-novel.

In early 1991, Grigoriev came to Leningrad for a new interview with Shutov. The fact is that the journalist had begun to doubt the veracity of his own text from a year earlier (since then, for example, he met with the investigator in charge of the Smolny arson investigation and gained access to the case materials). Grigoriev found nothing better than to settle into the Leningrad Hotel, where Shutov owned almost everything—his office was located there, he regularly ate lunch there, and his henchmen dined in the adjacent café. On the evening of February 22, 1991, Shutov, Nevzorov

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Grigoriev and I sat in the hotel restaurant, and then the former two escorted the journalist to his room (paid for by Shutov). The reporter would never leave, nor would six other guests. The Leningrad Hotel was a Soviet symbol, almost as significant as Smolny. It was specifically built with a view of the cruiser Avrora, whose salvo began the October Revolution. The Leningrad accommodated foreigners and celebrities—for example, the famous French actress Marina Vlady stayed there at the same time as Grigoriev. The fire at the Leningrad Hotel on the night of February 22-23, 1991, also became a symbol—of the poor quality of Soviet infrastructure and the helplessness of rescuers. Guests and firefighters (16 in total) were fatally inhaled by smoke from melting upholstery; neither the hotel nor the rescuers had the equipment to evacuate people from the upper floors. Two foreigners died in the fire—an American diplomat and a Swedish actor. Perhaps that's why the investigation was quickly shut down, declaring the fire's cause to be the spontaneous combustion of a television set.

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telescope in one of the rooms. However, subsequent events, including data on the next-

Subsequent witness testimony paints a different picture. That night, Airat Gimranov's men came to the hotel—he was Shutov's underling for dirty work, a hitman without the "tele" prefix. Gimranov's henchmen killed the journalist with a blow to the head, and then set the room on fire to cover up the traces of the crime (Gimranov himself recounted this when he was arrested years later). 426 This was already the umpteenth arson in Shutov's career! The location of the tragedy supports this version: Grigoriev's charred body was indeed found with a suspicious skull injury, and the source of the fire was located right in the area of the room where the journalist spent the night. Shutov himself turned out to be

He was one of the first to arrive at the ashes and managed to inspect Grigoriev's room before investigators arrived. Soon, a "killer" arrived with a television camera to film a story—in his program, Nevzorov said that Grigoriev likely lost his life because he was investigating the activities of Shutov's enemies. Such was the devilry in this ancient city with its revolutionary history.

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Shutov was a demonic figure with rebellious tendencies; it was not for nothing that critics nicknamed him "Moriarty." He did indeed employ a gang of bandits led by that same Airat Gimranov, with whom Shutov, either out of secrecy or eccentricity, used the pseudonym "Daniil Granin" (the name of the famous Soviet and Russian writer and resident of St. Petersburg) when communicating via pager. Gimranov's men killed people, ransacked competitors, and seized businesses. One of Gimranov's gang's specialties was assassination attempts using KamAZ trucks. Shutov controlled one of the city's motor depots, ATP-48, which had many trucks. Using these vehicles, Gimranov's men ransacked—literally—the enemies of the serial pyromaniac. Shutov's other opponents had their heads and limbs torn off by booby traps, and for others, explosives were placed right under their bodies.

highway, some managed to get away with a burned-out house or car - there was a lot of fire in the Shutov quarry. The killers from the Gim-

Ranova even gave acting and legal literacy lessons. Shutov himself

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And he apparently had a natural command of others. In the midst of one of the investigations against himself, for example, he parachuted onto a Leningrad street—a political banner was attached to the back of the instructor he was jumping with in tandem, and invited journalists were waiting below. During another investigation, Shutov managed to tear out the most important pages from the case file right during interrogation.

and eat them.

Despite such a busy criminal life, Shutov didn't neglect his intellectual work. He wrote two mockingly critical books about Sobchak and his former colleagues in the city government, and also created his own media outlet—

the newspaper "Novy Petersburg," which regularly harassed the mayor's office. Shutov, as before, "enveloped" the people around him—thanks to the support of supporters and journalists, he repeatedly evaded prosecution and remained free. And even more: in 1996, without holding any positions in the executive or legislative branches, thanks to his connections, he became the head of the regional branch of the State Duma commission studying the results of the elections.

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privatization (the Communists in parliament wanted to use him to get back at Sobchak). This was the peak of Shutov's fraudulent career. Using his State Duma credentials, he began to frequent the St. Petersburg government, demanding documents from officials on various transactions dating back to the Sobchak era. Manevich was the first to get it, since he was responsible for privatization in the city. The conflict escalated. In August 1997, Manevich came to consult with Galina Starovoitova, a State Duma deputy from St. Petersburg. She was one of the leaders of the Russian

of the Soviet democratic movement, at that time perhaps the most famous liberal politician in the country. Manevich said that Shutov was bothering him and asked for help. They agreed that on August 19, Manevich would meet with Starovoitova again to give her documents about Shutov's suspicious activities. August 18, 1997. That morning, Manevich and his young wife, Marina, got into a company Volvo and headed to work. The official

always rode in the passenger seat in the front, his wife in the back. The intersection of Nevsky Prospekt and Rubinstein Street is the most crowded area.

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Petersburg—the car slowed down. At that moment, a burst of automatic fire rang out from the roof of a building on the other side of Nevsky Prospekt. The fire was extremely accurate—most of the bullets, piercing the windshield and roof, hit Manevich. Several of the wounds were fatal. Marina's nose was damaged, either by a bullet or by shards of glass; the driver remained unharmed. Around the same time, Starovoitova's assistant, the well-known St. Petersburg journalist Ruslan Linkov, called Manevich's office to confirm a meeting scheduled for the following day. "Mikhail Vladislavovich has been killed," came the reply.

November 20, 1998. A little over a year has passed since Manevich's murder, and no one has been arrested. Deputy Starovoytova flies to her hometown from Moscow and is met by Linkov. Late in the evening, they arrive at Starovoytova's house on the Griboyedov Canal embankment. On the second floor, right in front of the apartment door, two unidentified men in makeup are waiting for the couple, who immediately open fire with a short-barreled machine gun and a pistol. "Finish off the bastard!" one of them says to the other.

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standing over Starovoitova's body. She was hit by five bullets and died instantly. Linkov suffered severe wounds, including a penetrating head wound, but miraculously survived. When he woke up much later in intensive care, first Russian Interior Minister Sergei Stepashin and then FSB Director Vladimir Putin visited him in the room. Both promised to find the perpetrators, and Stepashin added that Shutov's men allegedly wanted to finish off Linkov in the hospital (the case file mentions that the wife of the same Airat Gimranov called the neurosurgeon who was treating the wounded journalist).

The press and colleagues of Manevich and Starovoitova truly considered Shutov one of the main suspects in the murders. And then the story of this demonic figure took a truly hellish turn. At the turn of 1998 and 1999—that is, a little over a month after Starovoitova's murder—he came to Moscow for a meeting with Putin. What the two discussed, presumably at the President Hotel, is unknown. But from Shutov's acquaintances, we know that their relationship was terrible. Shortly before the meeting, Shutov

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The newspaper Novy Petersburg published a pamphlet about Putin's alleged involvement in the Stasi during his service in the GDR. According to an eyewitness, Putin was furious at the time (interestingly, years later, a Stasi ID card bearing Putin's name was actually found in the German intelligence archives431 —this, however, does not mean that the future leader of Russia secretly worked for GDR intelligence).

In any case, shortly after his meeting with Putin, Shutov was arrested, charged with Manevich's murder and implied to be involved in Starovoitova's death. Symbolically, Shutov was handcuffed in his office, in the same Leningrad Hotel (by then restored and renamed the Saint Petersburg Hotel) where his first biographer had mysteriously perished. However, the evidence against Shutov was so weak that a St. Petersburg court released him a few months later. But the former deputy was immediately detained again by special forces right there in the courthouse. No one gave much thought to the legal nuances: Shutov was sent to a cell, from which he was never released again.

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It was clear to everyone that his persecution bore the hallmarks of a sophisticated personal vendetta. We've seen many criminal cases in Putin's Russia, but never one like Shutov's. He sat in prison awaiting trial for seven whole years! And there wasn't even a trial in the usual sense of the word: Shutov's trial took place right in the Kresty pretrial detention center, where neither his supporters nor many journalists could get in. But Putin did. In the fall of 1999, the future president, and then

Prime Minister, arrived in his hometown. One of the purposes of the visit was to inspect the Kresty pretrial detention center, where Putin was particularly displeased: for example, he criticized the prison authorities for the inhumane conditions of detention. Later, Shutov relayed to one of his supporters that Putin had entered his cell, looked at his former colleague, and with satisfaction promised him a long prison sentence.432 Lawyers and human rights activists recorded that Shutov had been beaten in prison, and that he had suffered a serious back injury, which forced him

to move around in a wheelchair or crawl for some time (some, however, attributed this to the same artistry).

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(Sobchak's former aide). The court ultimately failed to prove his involvement in Manevich's murder, dropping this charge (as well as his involvement in Starovoitova's death). In 2006, Shutov was sentenced to life imprisonment for other crimes and sent to the remote White Swan prison colony in the northern Perm region. This colony is a deadly ordeal even for healthy people. According to one theory, it was so named because prisoners there are forced to walk bent at a right angle and raise their shackled hands high behind their backs, like swans raising their wings. It's unlikely Shutov could have met the administration's strictest demands, as he used a wheelchair in the colony, recalled his lawyer, Karinna Moskalenko. However, Shutov did not back down even here: even behind bars, he continued to write books and articles and smuggle them out. Some of them were published in the same newspaper, Novy Petersburg. One of the economists who worked with Putin and Manevich in Petersburg told the authors of this book many years ago: "As long as we live, Shutov will not get out of prison."434 Most of the members

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The members of the Leningrad Economic Circle, led by Chubais, called themselves staunch democrats and supporters of human rights. But not a single one of them said a word about the inhumane persecution of Shutov. It happened just as our interviewee had promised. In 2014, Yuri Shutov died in a prison colony—according to the authorities, of a heart attack. Three years later, unknown assailants beat Nikolai Andrushchenko, the editor of the Novy Petersburg newspaper, to death on the street. He had written the very article about Putin and the Stasi that infuriated the president. Andrushchenko had also once been a member of the Leningrad City Council and a fervent critic of Putin. The attackers were never found, blaming the incident on the journalist's addiction to alcohol. Andrushchenko became the second journalist who had written about Putin to mysteriously lose his life. The first to die was St. Petersburg resident Anatoly Levin-Utkin, who was then working for the newspaper "Legal Petersburg Today," in 1998. Levin-Utkin was the co-author of an article about Putin's appointment as director of the FSB.436 Among other facts about Putin, then unknown to the general public, the authors claimed that his appointment to the post

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The position was allegedly illegal. They believed that, according to internal documents of the special services, only an officer with the rank of general could become director (the existence of such a requirement is not established in the internal FSB documents). Shortly after the article was published, Levin-Utkin was beaten to death near his home.437

This crime, along with the death of Andrushchenko, the death of Shutov, the fire at the Leningrad Hotel, and the murders of Manevich and Starovoitova, became yet another cold case. This was almost always the case with crimes involving Putin in one way or another.

Whenever Putin spoke publicly about Manevich's death, he always displayed sympathy and feigned ignorance of its circumstances. In the same book, "First Person," published in 2000, he said: "Misha was a wonderful guy. I'm so sorry he was killed, such an injustice! Who did he interfere with? It's simply astounding. <…> I still don't understand how this could have happened. I don't understand." A rather strange statement, considering that Shutov, a well-known Putin

Tina, at that time was already under arrest

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accusations of Manevich's murder. Why should Putin feign good-natured ignorance? This was, again, a cold political dis-

the edge.

The Manevich family had a good acquaintance—his name was Ilya Traber. These people came from such different social strata that their relationship raised questions among many. Manevich's former colleagues from the economics circle have different stories about the nature of this friendship: some say that Traber was a secret admirer of Manevich's wife, others suggest that they bonded over a shared love of antiques. Traber is a criminal, one of the leaders of the St. Petersburg criminal world. He was once an officer in the Soviet submarine fleet, and after leaving military service, he began to move into business—back in the Soviet Union, he worked as a bartender in one of Leningrad's seedy spots, engaged in the underground (and later official) trade in antiques. Over time, Traber created a gang of bandits in Vyborg, on the route from Leningrad to Finland, and, in fact, controlled the city. We briefly mentioned

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Traber is described at the very beginning of the book as someone who had known Putin since the 1990s. They were connected by so many threads that the Kremlin was once even forced to officially confirm this acquaintance, although it downplayed the extent of their closeness. But the closeness was no joke. To avoid burdening readers with numerous examples, we will cite just two, but very illustrative ones.

How many chapters ago did we talk about the company "Sovex," which controlled a significant portion of the fuel supplies to the St. Petersburg seaport and Pulkovo airport? We explained then that the illegal commercial activities of Putin, the official, began with the company "Sovex"—

He obtained a stake in this company's capital illegally. It's important to note that Traber was the other shareholder in the company. This means that Putin and the gangster were literally business partners.

But before becoming partners, Putin and the crime boss weren't equals, and the younger man in the pair was the future Russian president. A second noteworthy example was first cited by Sergei Kosyrev—he once worked as Traber's bodyguard and later emigrated.

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where he began blogging about his Russian adventures.439 Among other things, Kosyrev recalls a particularly revealing episode: it was the early 1990s, Putin was probably working as deputy mayor at the time, and Traber was already a respected gangster, with an office in an antique store on Furshtatskaya Street. One day, the security guard recounts, Putin came to Traber for advice. The gangster was in a foul mood and didn't immediately admit the visitor. While waiting, Putin and Traber's security team drank soda in the carpentry shop.

It's quite possible that this workshop was used to restore the antique cabinets and chests of drawers that would later be lavishly furnished in the Manevichs' apartment—the apartment from which Mikhail and Marina fled under fire on an August morning in 1997. The entire country, unknowingly, saw the interior of their home—in the apartment of Manevich's widow, several episodes of the very same TV series "Bandit Petersburg" were filmed in 1999–2000. A prominent St. Petersburg gangster and art counterfeiter, Mikhail Monastyrsky, became the prototype for one of the characters—

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Mikhail Monakhov. Ironically, it was his apartment that served as the antique-decorated home of the official murdered by bandits. Manevich's widow herself appeared in "Bandit Petersburg" in a cameo role as a striking, long-legged brunette, assistant to the con man Semyon Borodaty. In the film, Borodaty was an official, like Marina Manevich's murdered husband. Truly, life is sometimes more colorful than any fiction.

After Manevich's tragic death, Traber found himself in a particularly advantageous position. The fact is that back in early 1997, this crime boss had attempted to take control of not only the oil terminal, but the entire St. Petersburg port. But there was a catch —a third of the shares.

The port belonged to the city, which likely had other plans for the business. Due to an oversight by the mayor's office, its shares were non-voting, which, according to those involved in the events, did not suit Manevich. Shortly before his death, the official instructed his deputy, German Gref, to convert the shares to voting status, but this never happened—Manevich was shot on Nevsky Prospekt, and Gref, who took his place,

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He was in no hurry to do anything with the shares. Ultimately, the only beneficiary of Manevich's murder was his (or his wife's) friend Ilya Traber, whose company gained control of the port—the status of the city-owned shares would only change years later.

It's unlikely Putin was unaware of the stock story. Not only is he acquainted with Traber, but Putin, from the very first days of his political career, was surrounded by those involved in that port affair: German Gref would eventually become Minister of Economy and head of the country's largest state bank, Sberbank; Alexey Miller, after working as Putin's secretary, would first become a top manager at Traber's port company and later become head of Gazprom; and finally, the young official Lyubov Sovershaeva, whose "mistake" led to the port's shares becoming non-voting, under Putin.

will make an impressive political career, becoming vice-governor of St. Petersburg.

It seems strange: Putin's inner circle is full of people who were at least directly aware of the murder of his colleague, but the crime remains unsolved. Traber, if we follow

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Despite publications in the Russian press, they were never even questioned about the incident. In fact, this isn't at all strange. Putin exploited Manevich's murder, as well as Starovoitova's violent death, for his own political ends.

When Shutov died in prison, a place became available for a new victim... Vladimir Kumarin

(he now uses his mother's surname, Barsukov), is probably the only gangster in the world to have a monument erected to him during his lifetime, and even with official honors.440 In 1997, in the very center of St. Petersburg, on Malaya Konyushennaya Street, the authorities pompously opened a pedestrian zone, adorned with the city's only monument to the great 19th-century writer Nikolai Gogol. Gogol looks stern, wrapped in a coat and looking down. The writer had no particular connection with Malaya Konyushennaya —

The Nevsky Prospect Club, an organization that proposed erecting a monument out of the blue, brought together businessmen associated with the Tambov criminal group. The Tambov gang, as they were most often called in the press, was named

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The group's popularity stems from the fact that its founders moved to Leningrad from Tambov during the Soviet era. By 1996, the undisputed leader of the Tambov gang was Kumarin, nicknamed "Kum." By this time, he had served two prison terms, lost his right hand in gang wars, and assembled the most combat-ready gang in St. Petersburg with extensive connections in politics and law enforcement. Kumarin was deservedly called the "night governor" of St. Petersburg, as the city depended on him just as much as on the authorities. Needless to say, it was Kum who inspired the main villain in the TV series "Gangster Petersburg." It also seems perfectly logical for the Putin era that the leader of the Tambov gang became the patron of the nuclear submarine Tambov, which was launched in the 1990s, when Kum subjugated St. Petersburg, the city of Russian naval glory.

Kumarin is short, with a neat mustache, bangs falling over his forehead, and a sharp, piercing gaze. He resembles Gogol—or rather, the Gogol monument erected by the "brothers" in 1997.

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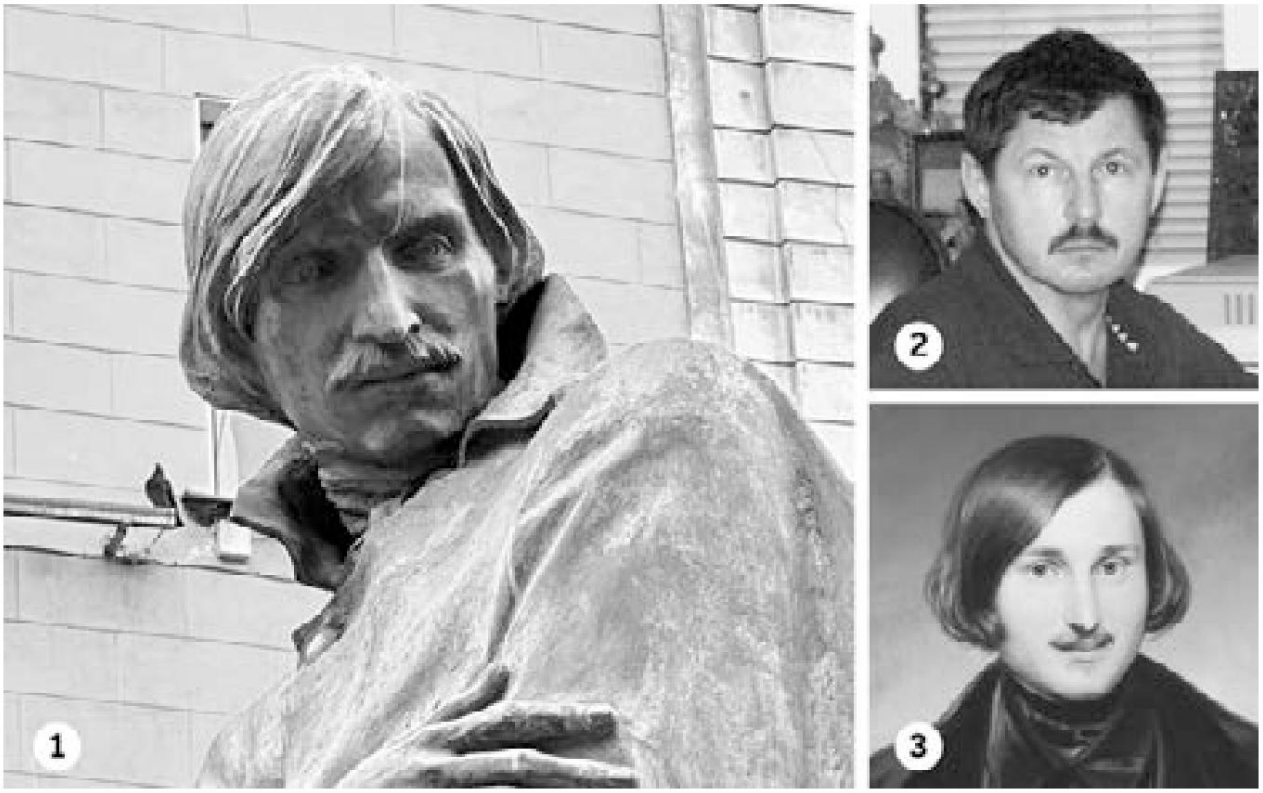
on Malaya Konyushennaya (if you go around the pedestal,
You can even read the names of some of Kumarin's subordinates who contributed to the installation of a monument to the boss, disguised as Gogol).



1) Monument to Nikolai Gogol in St. Petersburg. 2) Vladimir Kumarin. 3) Lifetime portrait of the writer.

Kumarin was closely connected to Putin and his circle, including through the same St. Petersburg seaport where the Tambovskaya gang leader, along with Traber, was involved in the oil industry. Putin and Kumarin are likely personally acquainted, as stated by Anatoly Sobchak's daughter, who met them.

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Together441 (two of Kumarin's old acquaintances told us the same thing on condition of anonymity). Kumarin himself once stated in a written interview that he doesn't know Putin. This interview was given in 2016 from prison, where Kumarin had by then spent almost 10 years. Journalists generally dislike such interviews and try not to consider them as evidence: a person in a Russian prison is under the complete control of the administration, letters sent to the outside are censored, conversations with lawyers are often recorded, and the punishment for disobedience can be terrible, because prisoners are effectively deprived of all rights. A close friend of Kumarin's explained his reticence in the prison interview with the phrase "he's still counting on something."442

The only thing Kumarin can count on is Putin's death. The exact moment when the bandit became the president's enemy is unknown. Most likely, something happened during that very period of "uncertainty" in 2007, when the Russian tsar's entourage was lost in uncertainty about his and their future. Towards the end of the second (and at that time, the last legitimate) presidency

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During his presidential term, Kumarin, as the press reported, wanted to redistribute the fuel market in St. Petersburg, which directly threatened the interests of Putin's close friend, his probable KGB colleague Gennady Timchenko. Timchenko reported Kumarin to the president. In the summer of 2007, a large brigade of security forces from Moscow descended on addresses linked to him in St. Petersburg and the surrounding region.

Local law enforcement was not involved to avoid a leak. Kumarin was detained at his dacha in Tarkhovka. There, investigators found a huge collection of paintings and sculptures, which they compared to the treasures of the Hermitage. A penchant for antiques, stucco, and gilding is a characteristic trait of almost all people from St. Petersburg, whether mafia or government officials.

From that moment on, Kumarin's life became indistinguishable from Shutov's. He faces new charges, one after another, is tried, then tried again, and spent most of his time in pretrial detention, where he can be controlled unhindered. The total sentence is already approaching 25 years. Behind bars, the one-armed, middle-aged bandit, a cancer survivor, is finally

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He lost his health—he even appealed to the European Court of Human Rights to prove his right to treatment. But none of this stopped the revenge of those who imprisoned him. Between 2019 and 2023, the FSB unexpectedly announced that Kumarin was also guilty of the murders of Galina Starovoitova and Mikhail Manevich (no verdicts had yet been issued on these charges). The security service reached this conclusion thanks to confessions from former Tambov militants serving long sentences in prison colonies on other charges. This recalls another shameful feature of Russian prisons: security officials often blackmail prisoners, exploiting their lack of rights, to coerce them into confessing to high-profile crimes or giving testimony favorable to the investigation, even entirely falsified ones. We don't know whether Kumarin was involved in the murders of Manevich, Starovoitova, and other cold cases from the 90s, but we do know that his criminal past didn't bother the authorities for many years, right up until the moment when the gangster crossed Putin's path.

One day we were talking about the fate of Kum with one of his good friends. Why doesn't Putin release

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Is the Tambov gang leader repenting from prison? According to the source, it's all down to Kumarin's temperament—"Putin doesn't want such a witness to be released."444 In his final years of freedom, Kumarin led an overly public, sometimes brazen, lifestyle. He gave interviews (including some quite candid ones), acted in films and sponsored films, and a line of petitioners formed for his reception at the Golden Country restaurant.

Everyone wanted something from the mafia boss, not from the state authorities. Shortly before their arrest, Kumarin's men, using their own methods, found and freed the children of St. Petersburg musician and businessman Pavel Borodulin, who had been kidnapped for ransom. Unidentified gangsters kidnapped the little girl and boy right off the street in May 2007. When the case became public, Kumarin volunteered to help —and ultimately, the hostages were released without ransom. It turned out that the police and FSB had searched unsuccessfully for the children, but the crime boss had found them.

But the height of insolence on Kumarin’s part was the pompous celebration of his own fiftieth birthday in that very restaurant “Golden

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"Country" in 2006 (the celebration was recorded on camera, and the footage was anonymously posted online in the spring of 2019, as if deliberately for the start of Kumarin's latest criminal prosecution446). Officials from St. Petersburg and Tambov, State Duma deputies, and pop stars came to visit the bandit. They offered toasts, one of which deserves to be quoted. Andrei Popov, then vice-speaker of the Tambov parliament and a gangster, said the following, smiling conspiratorially: "I'd like to raise a toast to those people who are with him *(with Kumarin -*

author's note) started... well, how to say *(laughter)* in simple terms, to engage in *(laughter),* maybe, business...
“with a number of other questions, they were setting up all these things *(loud* laughter)”447. Those gathered clearly understood what “things” and “questions” were being discussed. So that you too understand what the guests of the anniversary were laughing at, we will give another quote, this time from a newspaper report about one of the murders committed by the “Tambov gang”: “As soon as the car stopped at a red light near the Lieutenant Schmidt Bridge, the killers unleashed a barrage of fire on it. <…> The first grenade *(fired from a grenade launcher)*

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"The first of the tomcats (auth. note) knocked out the left rear door, near which Kapysh was sitting, and the second exploded inside. Kapysh's legs were torn off above the knees."448 This is the scene of the elimination of Pavel Kapysh, once also a bandit, and in 1999, when everything described happened, the head of a fuel company that competed with Kumarin's firms. The "Tambov gang" were not afraid to arrange a massacre in the very center of the city, during the morning rush hour, using

with two grenade launchers and several machine guns.

This is the only chapter in our book that doesn't require further biographical details about its main characters. All of them were killed, died, or will likely die in prison. All except Putin.

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3. Non-nobles and non-fortresses

How Putin Got His Own
Death Squads "It looks like the

wine was poisoned, Viktor Pavlovich. So the mob is right about the White Arrow," Babuin said.

- What arrow? - The antibiotic is alert.
lived.

— There's a rumor going around that the cops have done their job... When it's illegal, they're lawlessly killing the authorities.449

This fictional dialogue took place between the characters of the same series "Gangster Petersburg": Viktor "Antibiotic" Govorov (the main prototype is Vladimir "Kum" Kumarin) and Valery "Babuin" Ledogorov (in real life, Valery "Babuin" Ledovskikh). The circumstances were as follows: someone poisoned Antibiotic's wine, resulting in the deaths of two random people, and a crime boss and his henchman stand over their bodies. What "White Arrow" are these semi-fictional gangsters discussing, as suggested by the scriptwriters?

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Smolensk, mid-1990s. A criminal scene similar to that in St. Petersburg, albeit on a much smaller scale, was thriving here. One of the local gangster leaders was Tigran Petrosyan, a once-promising boxer who retired from the ring due to a brain injury. Petrosyan's men made a living by robbing and murdering those traveling along the highway from Moscow to Minsk and on to Europe. This route was then actively used by dealers in used European cars and truck drivers. Petrosyan was a savvy...

a hardened gangster, not without creative talent, just like Yuri Shutov in St. Petersburg. Petrosyan had his own man in the prosecutor's office, who hushed up any investigation against his boss (even despite irrefutable evidence). But that wasn't enough for Petrosyan. In 1998, at his instigation, an investigation was launched against high-ranking officers of the Smolensk police. Petrosyan and witnesses associated with him claimed that the officers had created a secret group called "White Arrow," the purpose of which was to eliminate individuals undesirable to the authorities, including crime bosses who could not be punished legally. Similarly,

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In conjunction with similar organizations in Latin America, the White Arrow could be called a "death squadron."

The officers were even temporarily sent to prison, but the case fell apart when Petrosyan himself confessed in 2000: he had made it all up to get rid of those who were hunting him.450 Perhaps the bandit's story was a fabrication, but there were ominous circumstances that seemed to confirm his words. Suffice it to say that Petrosyan himself, his man

His associates in the law enforcement agencies, the lawyer involved in the trial, and some of the police officers he accused of working for the White Arrow were mysteriously murdered within a few years of the case's closure. Naturally, these murders remained cold.

The story of the "White Arrow," regardless of its truthfulness, fell on fertile ground. As has already been said, many Russians believe in the secret power of the special services and their maliciousness (and people have many historical reasons for this). Stories about the "White Arrow" in the late 1990s and early 2000s were circulated by tabloid and respectable newspapers, repeated by

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Officials and public figures. One of the most famous Russian politicians of the 1990s, General Alexander Lebed, even officially proposed establishing a unit similar in function to the mythical "White Arrow." According to the general, this special forces unit would eliminate criminal leaders and terrorists.451 The idea failed, but this did not prevent Lebed from becoming one of the most popular politicians in the second half of the 1990s (third place in the 1996 presidential election, plus the laurels of the statesman who ended the bloody war in Chechnya). The Kremlin feared such a strong political rival: stripped of his posts in Moscow, Lebed went to work as governor of the remote Krasnoyarsk Territory, where he died in a helicopter crash in 2002. Popular rumor and the general's most ardent supporters immediately attributed the incident to a conspiracy by the secret services under Putin's leadership.452 A very Russian irony: the author of the idea to grant the secret services emergency powers was allegedly killed by the secret services themselves. Lebed was not the only tragically deceased person whose death sparked similar public speculation.

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For example, in July 1998, a couple of weeks before Putin's appointment as head of the FSB, Lev Rokhlin, also a general and State Duma deputy, a highly respected opponent of Boris Yeltsin within the left-wing patriotic camp, died tragically in the Moscow region. His death at the height of his political career was indeed unusual. According to investigators, Rokhlin was shot while sleeping by his wife, Tamara. The couple, exhausted by their child's serious illness, had quarreled, and the shooting was the result, investigators said. His wife, however, gave contradictory testimony, which fueled the rumors. Years later, Rokhlin's friend from the left-wing camp, State Duma deputy and fierce Putin critic Viktor Ilyukhin, would suddenly die. An autopsy would show he had suffered a heart attack, but his supporters would once again blame the secret services. In early March 2000, just before Putin's first presidential election, two famous people died in a plane crash in the Moscow region: the influential Chechen businessman Ziya Bazhaev and the popular journalist who was flying with him on

a specially chartered plane.

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Analyst Artem Borovik. The latter came from a privileged family, which included KGB officers, diplomats, and international journalists; his son-in-law served as President Yeltsin's press secretary. Borovik made a name for himself back in the 1980s, when he covered the war in Afghanistan and was

co-host of television programs popular among young people. At the time of his death, he headed the publishing house "Sovershenno Sekretno," which published a popular television program and a newspaper specializing in investigative reports. Some time after the plane crash, Putin's critics454 put forward the theory that shortly before his death, Borovik had been investigating the dark pages of the new Russian president's biography and was killed for this by the secret services in a carefully staged air accident. According to this theory, Borovik was supposedly flying to Georgia to interview an elderly woman living there. She claimed to be Putin's biological mother and said she had given up her child to an orphanage many years ago. This woman's story was subsequently cited repeatedly in media outlets that did not inspire much confidence. Borovik's death, however, is one of the rare ones in this

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A book of tragedies that didn't become cold cases. The investigation established that the plane crashed not because of an explosion, as some had claimed, but because of total cost-cutting—a practice as widespread in Russia as conspiracy theories. The crew was saving fuel by not properly using the flaps, and the airport was skimping on antifreeze by not spraying the plane with it before takeoff.

"People tend to overthink things," Yevgeny Savostyanov457 smiles slyly. Our interviewee has had a unique career. He's a mining engineer from Moscow who spent most of his youth on expeditions. In the 1980s, in his 30s, he became close to Moscow democrats and worked with Andrei Sakharov and Gavriil Popov. When Popov became the capital's first mayor in 1991, he

He called Savostyanov as his assistant. In this capacity, Savostyanov went down in history as the man who locked the building of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, essentially the headquarters of the country's governance under Soviet rule.458 This happened on August 23, 1991, when the attempted communist putsch finally failed. For a moment, many then thought that

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The past is irreversible; it remains, perhaps, only in the locked Central Committee building on Old Square in Moscow. The new reality even allowed for a step that was completely unthinkable by Soviet standards—appointing the democrat Savostyanov, who had no specialized experience, as director of the KGB for Moscow and the Moscow region. He still marvels at this confluence of circumstances—though in the political turmoil that reigned in the country at the end of 1991, anything was possible. Even the fearsome special service, which our interviewee took over, changed its name several times during his tenure. Having joined the KGB of the USSR in September 1991, Savostyanov resigned from the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation in December 1994 (two years later, it was renamed the FSB). But the essence of the "office" did not change, despite all the new trends: the overwhelming majority of the secret service's archives were never opened, despite all the democrats' attempts to achieve this, and the personnel of the old KGB quietly migrated to the new life, burying the idea of a nationwide lustration.

Savostyanov rose to the rank of deputy head of the Federal Grid Company of Russia. In 1994, among other things,

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He led one of the secret operations of the special services—overseeing covert support for the Chechen opposition, which was fighting with arms in hand against the separatists who had seized power in the Caucasian republic. Moscow supported the pro-Russian field commanders with weapons, money, and advice (and even the Chechen armored vehicles were manned by Russian drivers and gunners). It was a costly and bloody operation. Had it ended successfully for the Kremlin, ordinary people would have become even more convinced of the omnipotence of the Cheka. But it ended badly. The opposition combat units under the command of field commander Ruslan Labazanov, nicknamed Lobzik, were routed by the separatists, and Lobzik himself was killed (another cold case). "It's easier for people to believe in the power of the 'office' than to believe that people there often have their hands growing out of their asses," Savostyanov quips years later. However, he admits that the Chekists have always done ethically imperfect things—for example, collaborating with bad people. Lobzik, when Moscow placed its bet on him, was a criminal convicted of murder. Another pro-Russian field commander

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Mandir Bislan Gantamirov was trading in stolen oil. At the same time, the security services established contact with the most influential Chechen criminal group in Russia—the Lazan gang (the name comes from the Lazanya restaurant on Pyatnitskaya Street in Moscow, where Chechen gangsters once gathered). The Lazan gang killed and kidnapped people, stole budget money, and ransacked businessmen (this Chechen gang will still occupy an important place in our book). To use a well-known aphorism from the history of Latin America, all these criminals were "our sons of bitches" for the Russian special services.

us".

St. Petersburg and Moscow have always been perceived by their residents as antipodes. In the case of the Chekists, they proved themselves to be just that. Moscow demonstrated that a civilian, a staunch democrat, could lead the KGB during a time of reform. In the northern capital, things turned out exactly the opposite. Soon after the 1991 coup, Sergei Stepashin was appointed head of the local KGB. Previously, he had served in the Ministry of Internal Affairs' internal troops and taught the history of the Communist Party of the Sovie

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One of the first people Stepashin met at the "Big House" upon arriving at work was 40-year-old Nikolai Patrushev. Stepashin was strolling through the empty KGB office late one evening and suddenly noticed someone working hard in one of the offices. It was Patrushev. The employee's perseverance so impressed Stepashin that, having left for Moscow for a promotion, he would not forget about Patrushev and would take him to the capital.460 From then on, colleagues would sometimes call Patrushev "iron ass" - for his habit of sitting for long periods at work. In St. Petersburg, Patrushev was in charge of investigating economic crimes, meaning he was supposed to uncover embezzlement and corruption. In 1992, he received an appeal: Lensovet deputy Marina Salye brought a folder of documents describing

multi-million dollar scam involving the export of

country's natural resources. The scheme Salye uncovered was headed by the city's young vice-mayor, Vladimir Putin. Patrushev conducted an investigation and concluded that "there was no self-interest, much less corruption."461 In short, Patrushev turned the very first and therefore most important investigation against Putin into a cold case. Che-

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The man who rendered such an important service to the future president guaranteed his career.

В. Путин замечен
в беспорядочных связях

Почти рождественская история

НА

Грузия
не тер

The photo shows the first newspaper publication mentioning Vladimir Putin and the Resources for Food program.

"story"

Smena newspaper, January 14, 1991

In general, anyone interested in modern Russian history has certainly heard the name Patrushev. The press has repeatedly cited his, to put it mildly, bizarre views on the universe — a mixture of numerous conspiracy theories and rabid propaganda. Readers of these articles might think that Nikolai Patrushev is simply an elderly freak, like those who spend years at the impromptu flea market near the Historical Museum in Moscow. But this is a mistake.

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Performance. Like Putin, Patrushev constantly traded his views, deftly anticipating those in demand by the current political climate.

Patrushev began his KGB career as an aide-de-camp to General Oleg Kalugin. Kalugin was a highly successful Soviet intelligence officer from the 1950s to 1970s, serving in the United States and Europe; at one point, the young general was one of the heads of the USSR's foreign intelligence service. Then something happened (according to various versions, Kalugin was either suspected of treason, exposed for miscalculations, or the victim of slander), and the promising officer was sent to Leningrad as deputy head of the local KGB department. It was here, in the early 1980s, that Patrushev, a very young KGB operative, was assigned to Kalugin. Kalugin spoke rather favorably of his aide-de-camp: "Energetic, goal-oriented, ambitious. He loved reading and was interested in music." Such a modern guy"463.

In fact, these two are very different people, the only thing they have in common is that they come from families of officers. Kalugin is an excellent student in the study of

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A specialist in foreign languages (three) with extensive experience of life and illegal work in the West. Patrushev, a naval engineer by training, had never been to a capitalist country, had never properly studied foreign languages, and his entire experience consisted of working on dissidents and currency speculators. Once, as Kalugin recalled, Patrushev even consulted him on how to quickly put a dissident behind bars. Kalugin, according to him, advised his subordinate not to break the law. One Leningrader who knew Kalugin believes that Patrushev was likely spying on the general on orders from the KGB leadership. To be fair, it should be said that during his service, Kalugin was never accused of working against the Soviet regime (if that had happened, not only would he not have been appointed to the Leningrad headquarters of the KGB, but he would have been sent to trial with the prospect of the death penalty). In the late 1980s, Kalugin joined the Soviet democrats, repeatedly criticized the KGB and the Communist Party, and in the mid-1990s, he left for the United States. And only after all this did the Russian intelligence services accuse him of working for American intelligence. There were no compelling reasons

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No evidence of Kalugin's collaboration with other countries was presented, which did not prevent a Russian court from convicting him in absentia in 2002. This was highly symbolic: the USSR widely used in absentia sentences (often death sentences) against defectors; in the early 1990s, the Union collapsed, and this practice ceased, but was resumed under President Putin—specifically in relation to Kalugin.466 Putin himself publicly called Kalugin a traitor ,467 apparently not fully understanding the ambiguity of his words. After all, it turned out that Patrushev, the Chekist closest to Putin, who demonstratively denigrated the United States, was working under a traitor allegedly recruited by the Americans.

Patrushev then moved up the economic ladder, investigating the cases of those who didn't fit into the inefficient Soviet economy. For example, people who resold a scarce commodity, say, jeans, could easily become criminals. Underground jeans sales in the USSR could even lead to execution, as happened in the 1960s to black marketeer Yan Rokotov and two of his colleagues. It was in the economic department that he worked.

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Patrushev, when in 1991 his boss spotted him sitting in his office until late in the evening. Patrushev was later assigned the "Salye archive" to work on, but surprisingly saw nothing wrong with Putin's actions, who was selling state raw materials abroad to the detriment of his own citizens. Patrushev's ethics became increasingly flexible over the years.

In 1992, Patrushev rose to prominence—he was appointed head of the Federal Security Service (FSB) for Karelia. At first glance, this region was far less developed than St. Petersburg. But there were two "buts." First, Karelia is a sacred place for the latest generations of security officers, as their idol, the long-time head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov, once began his distinguished career there. Second, Patrushev had now become a salaried figure in the local security hierarchy.

Patrushev became the main man and could already lay claim to having an adjutant and a crowd of other subordinates. Anisimov, an officer with the Federal Security Service for Karelia, became Patrushev's adjutant and, at first, driver. As is often the case with drivers in Russia, those around him familiarly called him by his patronymic—Gavrilych.468 Anisimov

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He would also become an important participant in the bloody events we'll discuss later. Incidentally, Patrushev also had a personal driver—border guard officer Valentin Chuikin. The Karelian people nicknamed Patrushev "Nikolay Flakonych," a reference to his alleged fondness for drink at the time. Patrushev probably didn't fully embrace his new region—he only visited there occasionally, says someone who knew him then. However, regardless of whether Patrushev had feelings for Karelia or not, his new posting brought him not only career benefits but also material ones. Karelia —

It's also a border region, for which ties with Finland meant almost more than with Moscow. Moreover, the republic has always had a strong forestry industry—both legal and underground. The border and the forest attracted business.

Nesmenov, and after them the Chekists.

Lauri Rautio was one of the most famous Karelian businessmen in the 1990s – he traded in almost everything, from timber to cars. Rautio –
half Finnish, which helped him establish contacts with Finnish companies. However, later

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It was with the assistance of the Finnish authorities that Russian law enforcement officers detained him and imprisoned him.469 After his release, Rautio left for Israel because he is Jewish. Now he recalls what happened in Karelia as "another life." Patrushev, Rautio says, helped the Tambov gangsters with the passage of their cargo across the Russian border in the village of Vyartsilya (a border crossing in Karelia). For this, around 1993, Patrushev received his first foreign car as a gift from Vladimir Kumarin—a used Toyota Corolla. At the time, it was a generous gift. Another similar car was bought by one of the Tambov gangsters' leaders. The cars from Helsinki were transported by one of Rautio's companies. The entire extended Patrushev family dealt with the gangsters at various times. Nikolai has an older brother, Viktor, who is also a shipbuilder by training. He worked for many years as an engineer at a military plant. Each of the brothers has two sons. Back in the 1980s, not far from Leningrad, the

Patrushevs built a family nest - a large log house with six bedrooms, the number of which is

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Family members who sought privacy. Then, as the Patrushevs' careers progressed, another house with a billiard room and a bathhouse appeared nearby. As soon as Nikolai Patrushev rose through the FSB hierarchy, Viktor also abandoned his engineering job and was appointed a top manager at MegaFon, a company founded by people from Putin's circle. In Russian business, there's a concept called an *"obereg":* a person with a famous last name who, by his mere presence in the company's management, can protect it from problems with the state and racketeers. So, earning money from "oberegs" became the Patrushev family business. In addition to MegaFon, Viktor worked as an "obereg" for one of the Tambov firms and for the Dynamo sports club. His son, Alexei, was listed as a top manager at Master Bank, almost all of whose activities were illegal. The bank provided illegal cashing and money laundering services. The second (or first, who knows) "amulet" at Master Bank was the president's cousin, Igor Putin. This double "amulet" saved Master Bank for many years: it collapsed, and its owners

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They escaped investigation only when Putin and Patrushev left the bank's management.

The same Alexey Patrushev was also a "talisman" for a string of companies harvesting timber in Karelia. Once, the large Patrushev family needed lumber, and Alexey organized it, his father boasted in his only interview. This interview with Viktor Patrushev—

A separate story. During the January holidays in 2007, a large Russian expedition set off for Antarctica by helicopter—without any particular purpose, other than to plant the Russian flag at the South Pole and thereby insult the Americans who had built their station near the pole. It was also surprising that the polar explorers were accompanied by FSB chief Nikolai Patrushev. It later emerged that there were three Patrushevs on board the helicopter—Nikolai, Viktor, and Andrei (Nikolai's youngest son, who at the time held the rank of captain in the FSB). While Nikolai's presence as part of a propaganda expedition could be explained, what were his relatives doing in Antarctica? It looked like extreme tourism for the state.

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The Patrushevs were later awarded state orders for this.471 The family needed to justify themselves somehow, and then the Kremlin-affiliated newspaper Izvestia published an unctuous interview with Patrushev Sr. It suggested that the Patrushevs were selfless people who built wooden houses for themselves, lived in cramped quarters (six bedrooms for six families), had "only an icon" as their only valuable possession, and selflessly cared for Russia's prosperity (they practically handcrafted storage boxes for the statues of the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg).

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Nikolai Patrushev's older brother avoids publicity, but we've found one of his rare photographs. Thanks to Viktor's striking resemblance to his brother, the photo offers a glimpse of Nikolai Patrushev in the future.

Football Club Dynamo

"The bribes (in Karelia) were organized like this," Rautio recounts. "All the business was handled by a KGB officer we called 'Chernov.' We paid him a salary. And he shared it with the boss."472 The aforementioned Valentin Chuikin was hiding under the pseudonym 'Chernov,' and his boss was Nikolai Patrushev. Once, Rautio recalls, he urgently needed to fly on business.

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from Helsinki to Petrozavodsk; he chartered a business jet, but a problem arose: Besovets Airport in the capital of Karelia refused to accept the extra flight because it was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defense at the time. Rautio called Chuikin, and permission was immediately granted—in fact, Patrushev's driver personally arrived at the airport and escorted the businessman past security and customs. In other words, money was at least slightly more valuable to the Karelian security officers than the protection of Russia.

dins.

Naturally, things weren't presented that way in words. It was while working in Karelia that Patrushev mastered a clever political ploy that would later become his calling card. He became a ostentatious fighter against "separatism" and "threats to Russia's territorial integrity." Here's one example, for example:

From the earliest documents on this topic with Patrushev's signature. The head of the Karelian Ministry of Security in 1993 informs the republic's leadership about the decisions of the national

congress.

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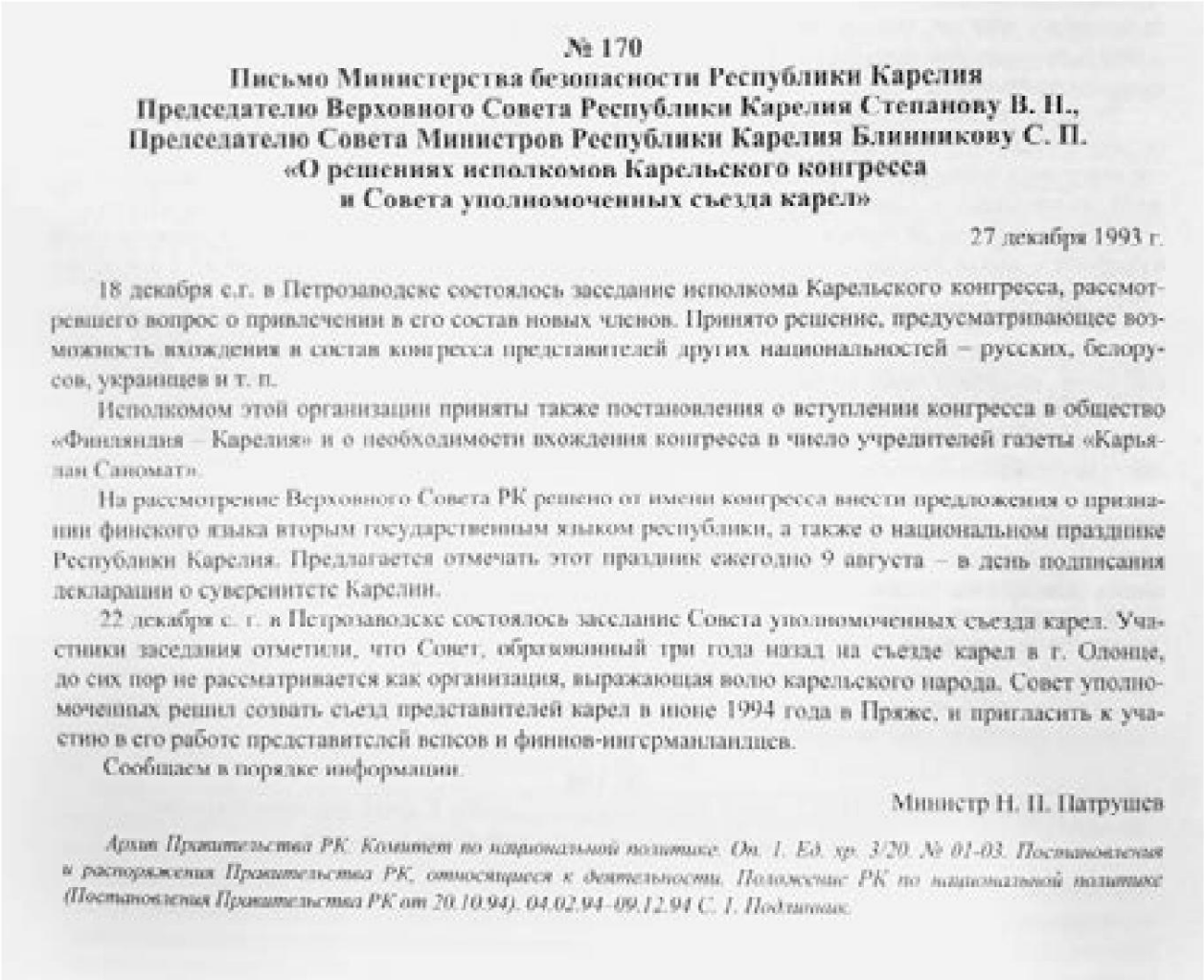

№ 170

Письмо Министерства безопасности Республики Карелия Председателю Верховного Совета Республики Карелия Степанову В. Н., Председателю Совета Министров Республики Карелия Блинникову С. П. «О решениях исполкомов Карельского конгресса и Совета уполномоченных съезда карел»

27 декабря 1993 г.

18 декабря с.г. в Петрозаводске состоялось заседание исполкома Карельского конгресса, рассмотревшего вопрос о привлечении в его состав новых членов. Принято решение, предусматривающее возможность вхождения в состав конгресса представителей других национальностей – русских, белорусов, украинцев и т. п.

Исполкомом этой организации приняты также постановления о вступлении конгресса в общество «Финляндия – Карелия» и о необходимости вхождения конгресса в число учредителей газеты «Карьялан Саномат».

На рассмотрение Верховного Совета РК решено от имени конгресса внести предложения о признании финского языка вторым государственным языком республики, а также о национальном празднике Республики Карелия. Предлагается отмечать этот праздник ежегодно 9 августа – в день подписания декларации о суверенитете Карелии.

22 декабря с. г. в Петрозаводске состоялось заседание Совета уполномоченных съезда карел. Участники заседания отметили, что Совет, образованный три года назад на съезде карел в г. Олонце, до сих пор не рассматривается как организация, выражающая волю карельского народа. Совет уполномоченных решил созвать съезд представителей карел в июне 1994 года в Пряже, и пригласить к участию в его работе представителей вепсов и финнов-ингерманландцев.

Сообщаем в порядке информации.

Министр Н. П. Патрушев

Архив Правительства РК. Комитет по национальной политике. Оп. 1. Ед. хр. 3/20. № 01-03. Постановления и распоряжения Правительства РК, относящиеся к деятельности. Положение РК по национальной политике (Постановления Правительства РК от 20.10.94). 04.02.94–09.12.94 С. 1. Подлинник.

This organization, which advocated for the self-determination of the Karelian people, was monitored by Russian intelligence services for many years until it was liquidated by government order in 2015. Another ten years would pass, and the FSB would even label the very name of Karelia, written in the Karelian language—Karjalan tašavalta—as terrorist. Over the years, Patrushev would begin to detect separatism and territorial claims by other states.

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Not only in Karelia, but also in the Caucasus, the Volga region, and the regions bordering Ukraine. Apparently,

family ties are very important to Nikolai Patrushev. Besides his immediate family, his extended "family" included all his significant colleagues from Karelia, and, a little earlier, his classmates from Leningrad. Patrushev moved to Moscow for work in 1994, and since then, one after another, his protégés have been moving to the capital.

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БОЛЬШАЯ «СЕМЬЯ» НИКОЛАЯ ПАТРУШЕВА

Глава ФСБ в 1999–2008 годах, секретарь Совета безопасности в 2008–2024 годах, сейчас — помощник президента России.

Карелия

Владимир Проничев

Командовал пограничными войсками в Карелии во время работы Патрушева в республике. В 1994 году стал преемником Патрушева на посту директора республиканской ФСК. Позже стал заместителем и первым заместителем директора ФСБ, курировал важнейшие направления — борьбу с терроризмом и защиту конституционного строя. В 2003–2013 годах командовал пограничными войсками ФСБ.

Валентин Чуйкин

Своего карельского шофера Патрушев тоже забрал в Москву, где тот дослужился до замдиректора управляющего делами ФСБ. Чуйкин погиб в авиакатастрофе летом 2004 года — он любил посидеть за штурвалом раритетного самолета Ли-2.

Ленинград/Петербург

Борис Грызлов

Одноклассник Патрушева по школе №211 в Ленинграде, впоследствии друг семьи Патрушевых. Политическая карьера началась в 1999 году с приходом Путина к власти — Грызлов стал руководителем пропрезидентской фракции в Госдуме. В 2001–2003 годах — министр внутренних дел России, в 2003–2011 — спикер Госдумы. С 2012 года значимых постов не занимает. Знакомые и критики отзываются о Грызлове одинаково: не очень умный карьерист[473].

Александр Бортников

Работал в ленинградском КГБ вместе с Патрушевым и Путиным еще с 70-х. С 2004 года — заместитель директора ФСБ. С 2008-го — директор ФСБ.

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Рашид Нургалиев

Вырос в карельском поселке Надвоицы, где со сталинских времен находились лагеря для заключенных, строивших Беломоро-Балтийский канал (отец Нургалиева служил офицером охраны в одной из местных колоний). Прошел все ступени карьерной лестницы в карельском управлении КГБ. С 1992 года служил в Петрозаводске под руководством Патрушева. В 1995-м вслед за своим начальником уехал в Москву, где работал в Кремле, а потом был замдиректора ФСБ. В 2003-м стал министром внутренних дел; МВД при Путине — это структура, подчиненная старшим товарищам из «конторы». С 2012 года — замсекретаря Совета безопасности.

Виктор Иванов

Приятель Грызлова и его семьи со времен, когда оба учились в Ленинградском электротехническом институте связи. В общем кругу познакомился и с Патрушевым. В 70-х и 80-х служил в КГБ, поддерживал знакомство с будущим водителем Патрушева Валентином Чуйкиным. В 90-х работал в мэрии Санкт-Петербурга и в центральном аппарате ФСБ. В 2000 году по предложению Путина стал заместителем главы администрации президента, где на протяжении четырех лет курировал кадровые вопросы. Два не связанных друг с другом собеседника описали Иванова почти идентично: «недалекий» и «необразованный»[474].

473 474

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Карелия

Владимир Анисимов

Адъютант Патрушева в значительной степени повторил карьерный путь других его карельских подчиненных. Шеф забрал Анисимова в Москву, где тот поднялся до поста замдиректора ФСБ. С 2005 года работает в частном бизнесе, связанном с чекистами.

Ленинград/Петербург

Виктор Юраков

Ленинградский приятель семьи Патрушевых. В 2003 году стал ректором одного из двух крупнейших оборонных вузов страны — санкт-петербургского Военмеха.

Юрий Заостровцев

Потомственный кагэбэшник, в 1992 году работал под командованием Патрушева в Карелии. Потом трудился в Кремле, а с 1998 по 2004 год служил в центральном аппарате ФСБ, в том числе на должности замдиректора, курирующего борьбу с экономическими преступлениями. Не раз подозревался в коррупционных связях, в частности, фигурировал в уголовном деле «Трех китов», о котором мы рассказывали выше.

Сергей Смирнов

Еще один одноклассник Патрушева и Грызлова. Работал в Ленинградском КГБ, потом ФСБ. С 1998 года — на работе в центральном аппарате ФСБ, с 2000 до 2020 года — заместитель директора ФСБ, курировавший важнейшие направления: военную контрразведку и борьбу с экономическими правонарушениями. Фигурировал во множестве коррупционных скандалов, был связан с рынком «обналички».

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Patrushev's finest hour (and that of all his relatives and friends who followed him up the career ladder) came in the summer of 1999. As soon as Yeltsin's entourage notified Putin that

It was he who would become the president's successor, and the search for a new head of the FSB began. In short, Putin initially didn't want to see Patrushev in this post. The choice of successor fell on an experienced fighter against dissidents and anonymous writer, Viktor Cherkesov, whose tragic fate we discussed at length in the first part of the book. Putin had a meeting with him, during which the subordinate turned down his boss. As an acquaintance of both recounts, Cherkesov said that he was "not ready for such an important post."475 The interlocutor explains Cherkesov's behavior by his "conscientiousness" (about

Many people who knew this Chekist spoke of his positive traits.476 As we remember, Putin doesn't like refusals, even polite ones. Patrushev was nominated for Cherkesov's intended position, which ultimately led to a heated conflict between the two men—also described at the beginning.

books.

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But Patrushev's rise to the post of FSB director was only part of a much larger process: since the late 1990s, KGB/FSB alumni, including those from St. Petersburg and Karelia, have literally flooded the civil service. Their presence in areas unrelated to security has, without any plausible explanation, increased exponentially. They have even infiltrated areas where their presence would naturally cause surprise.

Vladimir **Kozlov** served for years in the KGB special forces under the cover of a correspondent for the magazine "Asia and Africa Today." In 2001, he became Deputy Minister of the Press. Kozlov would serve as one of the media's top officials for 20 years, retiring only in 2020.

Alexander **Kalinin** had been involved in secret communications for the KGB since the 1970s. In 2002, he was appointed chief developer of the GAS "Vybory" electronic system, which the Russian authorities have been using to rig elections ever since.

— **Leonid Nadirov,** a KGB officer and economist by education, was unexpectedly appointed director of the Vaganova School back in 1986,

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The main university for training Soviet and Russian ballet dancers. The explanation was obvious: Nadirov was assigned to a sensitive area for the KGB. And under Putin, this "choreographer" immediately became Deputy Minister of Culture.

— **Vladimir Shultz,** a philosopher by profession

In fact, at the beginning of Putin's reign, he served as deputy director of the FSB. He was soon sent to work at the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Higher Attestation Commission (meaning he oversaw the defense of candidate and doctoral dissertations and how).

— **Vladimir Strzhalkovsky,** a fellow countryman of the president, served in the KGB in the Leningrad region. Since 1999, he oversaw tourism in various government positions. — **Vladimir Kulakov** worked in the KGB since the early

1970s, serving in both foreign intelligence and the central apparatus of the special services. In the 1990s, he commanded the Voronezh division of the KGB/FSB. In 2000, simultaneously with Putin's rise to power, Kulakov became governor of the Voronezh region. This is a rare situation—usually the head of a regional

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FSB units are keeping an eye on the governor from among the “civilians”, and in Voronezh on the pro-
over the course of eight years, both executive and con-
Control functions were effectively in the hands of the "office." **Vladimir Litvinenko** is

now known as the rector of the Mining University in St. Petersburg and a billionaire (he owns a large stake in PhosAgro, a fertilizer company). Litvinenko began his career in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a KGB informant. Two of his acquaintances recounted the following: while serving as the commandant of a dormitory at the Mining Institute, Litvinenko was caught stealing televisions and bed linens. He wasn't jailed, but likely under investigation and subsequently promoted through the ranks. He proved invaluable when the "Resources for Food" program was established. Litvinenko advised the mayor's office on what raw materials could be exported from clay and earth factories in the Leningrad region. As a result, Litvinenko got everything he wanted: being not even a scientist, but only the caretaker of the Mining Institute, in 1994 he became its rector (and, apparently, will remain so for life), the owner

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A huge stake in PhosAgro, the scientific advisor for Putin's dissertation, and the head of his campaign staff for many years. Two sources familiar with PhosAgro shareholders are certain that Litvinenko owns the company's shares not for himself, but on behalf of Putin.478 But even if this is true, Litvinenko is still the richest scientist in Russia. This hardly says anything about him, but rather about Russian science.

The Academy, ballet, tourism, media, and many other, even the most obscure, spheres of life were infiltrated by KGB and FSB personnel. But the following fact speaks even more to the intelligence infiltration of civilian administration:

- **Evgeny Savostyanov,** about whom we have already told you a lot, became deputy in the late 90s.
The head of the presidential administration, whose responsibilities included the Kremlin's personnel department, was Savostyanov. It was Savostyanov who reviewed the resumes of people applying for important positions in the executive branch. As we have already mentioned, he saw Putin's personal file, which did not impress him. In 1998, Savostyanov resigned from

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The Kremlin due to a conflict with Yeltsin's "family." A real Chekist was appointed in his place—
A man with no civic or democratic experience, General Vladimir Makarov. From then until today, all personnel supervisors in the Kremlin have been Chekists, acquaintances and colleagues of Patrushev and Putin. 479 We once asked one of the heads of the presidential administration why it is customary in Russia for Chekists to be in charge of personnel. At first, the interviewee said it was "natural," but after thinking about it, he added sadly, "Nonsense, of course."480

Using the comparison we've already made, we can say that with Putin's election as president and Patrushev's appointment as head of the FSB, the "St. Petersburg" model of the future has finally triumphed over the "Moscow" one. One day, Patrushev will call the security officers who have flooded the Russian government "neo-nobles."481 This is a highly symbolic metaphor—it makes clear who these former inhabitants of the cramped offices of the "Big House" see themselves as, imprisoning people for their views.

and decorating their homes with antique flowerpots.

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However, there was also a very important emotional element to the Chekists' rise to power. It's easiest to understand with one dramatic example.

Every year on December 20th, Soviet, and now Russian, security officers celebrate their professional holiday—the day in 1917 when the Bolsheviks established the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (the predecessor of the KGB and FSB). In 1997, they celebrated a milestone anniversary—80 years. But here's the problem: December 20th that year fell on a non-working day, a Saturday. So, the security officers celebrated early—a banquet and concert for senior FSB officials was held in Moscow on the evening of Friday, December 19th. However, the celebration had to be abruptly interrupted. In southwest Moscow, on Mosfilmovskaya Street, home to many foreign embassies, an emergency occurred. An unbalanced criminal, armed with what appeared to be a pistol and a grenade, took a Swedish diplomat hostage as he entered his diplomatic mission. The terrorist, along with the hostage, locked himself in a Volvo car parked in the parking lot and demanded money and the opportunity to leave safely.

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country. In terms of scale, preparation, and potential threat, this incident seemed insignificant compared to the other terrorist attacks we will describe in this part of the book. Nevertheless, the entire FSB leadership, including the then director of the special service, Nikolai Kovalev, arrived at Mosfilmovskaya straight from the banquet. It looked

so that the security officers wanted to show their determination and professionalism. However, it ended
This is a worldwide disgrace with tragic consequences482.

Who directed the hostage rescue operation at Mosfilmovskaya and how it was conducted remains unclear even over the years. Television and newspaper journalists (including foreign ones) were freely working on the scene at the time—videos regularly capture a group of senior FSB officers conferring while standing in an open space near the terrorist. The journalists later speculated that many of the FSB officers were intoxicated. The first stage of the operation was successful—the terrorist released the Swedish diplomat in exchange for a willing hostage, Colonel Anatoly Savelyev, the head of the FSB.

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The nickname of the headquarters of the FSB's anti-terrorist unit "Alpha." The "Alpha" are the elite of the Russian special services, people who specialize in hostage rescue. It was logical that they

found themselves at the scene of the terrorist attack; it seemed slightly less logical (though very courageous) that a senior Alpha officer surrendered himself to the terrorist484. But what happened next was completely devoid of logic. The terrorist and Savelyev found

They remained in the car for quite a while—during this time, the special services probably had enough chance to eliminate the criminal with a sniper shot. At some point, Savelyev and the terrorist began to struggle inside the car, but there was no assault. Instead, the negotiators brought a thermos of tea and a bottle of cognac into the car. It is unknown whether the terrorist drank, but Savelyev took a sip. He felt ill—journalists assumed the alcohol was poisoned to neutralize the criminal. A doctor arrived and gave the officer an injection, which apparently had no effect. Then the terrorist himself helped Savelyev out of the car. The doctor hurried to them again. And at that moment, Savelyev's subordinates, armed with pistols, attacked.

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Eva. With a few shots, they killed both the terrorist and their commander. The doctor, caught in the fire, miraculously survived. The terrorist managed to throw a grenade, but it apparently turned out to be a fake (whether he had a real weapon remained unknown). This insane scene was seen on the news throughout the world. Even more insane was General Kovalev's speech—he addressed journalists right there, outside the embassy building, and didn't even seem worried, more like a man intoxicated. "The operation was carried out at the highest level," he said. Kovalev, without thinking twice, explained Savelyev's death by claiming that he had long-standing heart problems, from which he died before the shooting began. These claims were refuted by doctors and journalists. But nothing changed in the official version —the FSB simply covered up its shame, distorted the murdered officer's medical records, and thereby turned another cold case into a cold case. Lying to cover up its own crimes and failures will become a habit for the Russian intelligence agencies.

In the mid-90s, ordinary security officers felt abandoned and humiliated, recalls

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Savostyanov486. Under the USSR, KGB officers were secret arbiters of fate, heroes wrote about them.
They wrote epic books and made equally heroic films. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the "office's" authority was shaken, to say the least. Many professionals quit due to lack of money, while others lost their bearings in the new, capitalist world. Even in Moscow, rank-and-file employees were underpaid, and there was no money for new weapons, transportation, or technology. In the three years before the disgrace at Mosfilm, Russian special services botched two major hostage rescue operations in the North Caucasus, causing even greater damage to civilians and their own prestige—

First in Budyonnovsk (Stavropol Krai), and then in the village of Pervomayskoye (Dagestan). In both cases, hundreds of hostages and security forces died due to numerous leadership errors.

The "office's" prestige had to be saved. Including in the eyes of the employees themselves, whom society could stop fearing. In other words, the very social myth of the secret omnipotence of the intelligence services, about which we have written so much, needed to be saved.

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discussed in this chapter. This task fell to Putin and Patrushev, who succeeded each other as heads of the FSB in 1998 and 1999.

Various means—material and symbolic—were put into play. State appropriations for the secret services began to grow, and one after another, people from the "office" received high-ranking appointments, including inexplicable ones like those we listed above. In the summer of 1999, Putin, then head of the FSB, issued an order to restore the memorial plaque to former CPSU General Secretary and KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov on Lubyanka Square. It was a highly symbolic act. Andropov—

A highly mythologized, but genuinely popular historical figure among the Cheka and a significant portion of society. He led the country in the early 1980s, and before that, he headed the KGB for many years, precisely during the period of its greatest power. When the Soviet Union fell, democratically minded citizens tore down the monument to Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Cheka/KGB/FSB, near the secret service's headquarters on Lubyanka Square. While people were busy with the monument, the Cheka quietly dismantled and hid the one hanging on the building.

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"Offices" erected a memorial plaque in honor of Andropov. They lost one idol, but saved another. Putin personally returned this plaque to the FSB building on December 20, 1999. That evening, he delivered a rude joke at an FSB board meeting that turned out to be prophetic. "I would like to report that the group of FSB officers sent on an undercover mission to the government is coping with their initial tasks,"

The future Russian tsar began his speech to his colleagues from the "office." 487 He smiled, the Chekists in the audience laughed approvingly, the television viewers joked favorably about the phrase, and Putin's approval rating by the beginning of 2000 reached a record 84%. It was obvious that the return of the myth of the "office's" omnipotence appealed not only to the non-nobles themselves, but also to ordinary people.

Besides symbolic gestures and money, the FSB leadership has come up with another way to restore the special service's former prestige, or rather, to restore the myth of its secret omnipotence. This method is to make it clear that traitors, real and imagined, are to blame for the decline of the "office." In the sp-

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The list of those subject to punishment included a wide variety of people. In the late 1990s, a series of criminal cases of treason against military personnel and scientists working on environmental and defense issues swept across Russia.488 At the same time, the persecution of defectors from their own—

Vladimir Putin, having just come to power, publicly called Oleg Kalugin a traitor, and a swift criminal case was launched against Patrushev's former boss. Those who had vexed the "office" in any way were also turned into enemies. Mikhail Trepashkin, a senior FSB investigator, received an unexpected assignment from his commander, Nikolai Patrushev, in the mid-1990s: to gather information about an ordinary Muscovite woman who owed money to an old friend of Patrushev's from Karelia. Trepashkin considered the assignment unauthorized, and he began to stir up trouble. He was hastily fired, and then brutally beaten on the street (the attackers were never found, a cold case). Trepashkin's next public appearance was on November 17, 1998, among other FSB officers in the Interfax news agency press conference room. Those sitting at the table next to Trepashkin looked colo-

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ritno - some with an open face, some in dark glasses, and one even in a black balaclava.

Dmitry Dukhanin/ Kommersant

What they said was even more impressive. The Chekists admitted that they, on orders from their superiors, had organized the attack on Trepashkin, and that they, again on orders from their commanders, had prepared to kidnap the well-known Chechen businessman Umar Dzhabrailov and to murder the influential entrepreneur and politician Boris Berezovsky. The only person at the table, besides Trepashkin, who did not hide

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revealed his identity, was FSB Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Litvinenko. The press conference caused a major scandal. Following it, an interview with Litvinenko and two of his colleagues appeared in the media.

where they spoke about the details of the assassination attempt being prepared against Berezovsky. The interview was taken six months before the scandalous press conference and remained unpublished in case the businessman did not receive guarantees of his own safety.

things.

Over the years of our journalistic careers, we have seen many interviews, but this one seemed the most unusual.

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Four men in the middle of the night, smoking continuously, barely able to speak from lack of sleep, stress, and probably alcohol, constantly forgetting simple words, giggling nervously and interrupting each other, invariably looking at the floor490.

Video, Associated Press

Then, six months before the press conference, Litvinenko filed a complaint against his superiors for pressuring him into illegal actions. An investigation and internal review were launched. And in late summer 1998, Litvinenko was granted an audience with Putin. Berezovsky helped arrange the meeting so that Litvinenko could personally convince the new head of the FSB that something sinister was going on within his agency. The latter ignored his subordinate. That evening, when his wife asked how Putin had reacted to his story, Litvinenko replied, "He was like a fish," meaning he showed no emotion. That same evening, Litvinenko told his wife that their phone was most likely tapped. “From that very moment on, Alexander would shudder at the sight of parked white Volkswagen minivans,” says Marina Litvinenko (FSB task forces often travel in such vehicles).

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By early autumn, the case of the assassination attempt on Berezovsky was closed, and none of those who, according to Litvinenko, planned it, were held accountable. However, Litvinenko's own problems with his superiors only

worsened.

After all this, the lieutenant colonel and his colleagues decided to hold a press conference.492 What exactly did they say? They reported that within the FSB there was a unit specializing in extrajudicial reprisals against people who had somehow displeased the leadership, but whom the law could not punish. In other words, Litvinenko, Trepashkin, one man in a balaclava, and three in dark glasses publicly admitted to the existence of the "White Arrow," a death squad. In bureaucratic language, this structure was called URPO—the FSB Directorate for the Development and Suppression of Criminal Organizations. At its head was General Yevgeny Khokholkov. He came from a family of intellectuals repressed by the Chekists under Stalin. However, he himself joined the KGB, where he worked throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Presumably, Khokholkov and his subordinates

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In 1996, the prisoners planned the assassination of Chechen separatist leader Dzhokhar Dudayev.493 Formally, this was also an extrajudicial execution -
Dudayev was then the democratically elected leader of a region. But that incident didn't particularly alarm anyone, because Dudayev's men were themselves responsible for numerous deaths. Apparently, the experience of eliminating Dudayev convinced the "office" leadership that Khokholkov could decisively combat other "enemies" as well.

After the scandalous press conference, many speculated that Boris Berezovsky had paid the FSB officers for their "cameo." While there was no denying the existence of friendly and financial ties between Litvinenko and Berezovsky, it's worth noting that reality rather confirmed what was said in the Interfax news agency room. Here's why.

No one has ever offered a single rational explanation for what might have motivated Berezovsky, a member of Boris Yeltsin's "family," to lie to the FSB, then headed by the family's protégé, Vladimir Putin. A member of the "family" publicly accuses a "family" protégé of having his subordinates plot an extrajudicial execution? Seems unconvincing.

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All participants of the press conference book-
The very next day, they began making an example of them. Everyone was fired on the spot, and many were sent to prison under various pretexts. If they had spoken nonsense, why such stubborn cruelty towards them? The repressions were carried out with Putin's public sanction. Commenting on the employees' press conference, Putin was stern—he said nothing about extrajudicial executions, but he did rebuke his subordinates for making the inner workings of the "office" public. Litvinenko, after spending some time under arrest, was the only one who managed to leave the country, where he was later brutally murdered by FSB agents. Some "traitors," apparently, were forced to renounce Litvinenko and testify against him (this is still a Stalinist practice among domestic intelligence agencies), but this only led to further confirmation of the truth of what was said in Interfax.

For example, in 2000, the government-affiliated newspaper Moskovsky Komsomolets published an interview with officer Viktor Shebalin495 —he was the one wearing a balaclava at a press conference. This publication bore all the hallmarks of an informational

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FSB operations. The interview was signed by journalist Alexander Khinshtein. If Nevzorov, whom we have mentioned many times, was a "television killer," then Khinshtein—

"a newspaper killer." Colleagues remember him as a man who obediently published any information, often false, provided to him by the FSB.496 Some sources claim that he was recruited by the Chekists at a very young age.497 In exchange for his articles, Khinshtein received patronage from above—

Already in 2003, he became a State Duma deputy from Putin's party. In a word, Khinshtein—
He's a first-class crook, and any note he signs is in itself evidence that the "office" wants to somehow distort the truth. But Shebalin's interview is a completely heartfelt confession. Khinshtein "asks"

Chekist:

- Victor, you were ordered to kill Berezov-
sky or not?

— The question is very complex and very simple...

Then Shebalin says, not at all embarrassed:

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"During the conversation, Kamyshnikov *(Khokholkov's deputy, Shebalin and Litvinenko's boss – author's note),* in my opinion, made the wrong statement: that it would be a good idea to kill Berezovsky. Perhaps he was overtired, or perhaps he snapped in the heat of the moment."

“They say it would be a good idea to kill Berezovsky.” A powerful phrase, accurately describing what was happening in the minds of the "neo-nobles," led at the time by Putin and Patrushev. It's worth remembering that Berezovsky, despite all his outstanding shortcomings, which will be discussed later, was, during the period in question, Deputy Secretary of the Russian Security Council, that is, one of the highest-ranking civil servants, and also a co-owner of major Russian companies, including Channel One, which aired the interview with Litvinenko and his comrades. "It would be nice to kill the Deputy Secretary of the Security Council," one FSB officer would say to others. A slip of the tongue due to fatigue? That interview contained many more frightening revelations, but the main thing was missing: Shebalin didn't say a word, and Khinshtein

He never asked about other assassination attempts that the URPO was preparing, for example, on Trepashkin. It was obvious that the interview was meticulously staged.

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was carried out by the FSB itself - Shebalin only spoke
What he was ordered to say. Subsequently, the "office" repeatedly recruited Shebalin and other former colleagues of Litvinenko to participate in the campaign to defame him. Every dirty trick ever devised by propaganda was employed. State-linked media accused Litvinenko of adultery and child neglect. 498 Even his father, the aging veteran prison guard Walter Litvinenko, was later drawn into the libelous stories about the former FSB officer. He said vile things about Alexander (even though he hadn't lived with him for most of his childhood) and ended up hugging his son's killer, FSB agent Andrei Lugovoi, in front of a television camera. 499 It was a dirty, insulting defamation campaign built on a single word— *"traitor."* That's what Litvinenko was called by his former colleagues, corrupt journalists like Khinshtein, and government officials, including Putin himself and everyone who supported him. But why *a traitor?* If his story about extrajudicial executions is pure fabrication, then it's a trivial crime; he's a liar, a fabricator, a fraud. Such a person could be prosecuted for slander or simply ridiculed. But Litvinenko...

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Nenko was declared *a traitor,* a man who *had revealed* some of the "office's" secrets. People get killed for that.

What happened next with the URPO remains unknown. The media reported that the department was disbanded due to the publicity, and Khokholkov was asked to resign. The latter seems likely, as the officer was appointed to a new position in the tax service shortly afterward. The death squad's disbandment cannot currently be verified—the FSB's internal records are sealed. However, subsequent events

will clearly show that, even under new names, the unit for eliminating enemies of the government has not disappeared.

You'll meet most of the characters in this chapter again in the next. With the possible exception of the men in balaclavas and dark glasses, Litvinenko's colleagues at the URPO, who first confirmed his claims about preparing extrajudicial executions, and then, under pressure from their superiors, disowned their former comrade. Nothing remarkable happened in their fates. They were punished and then forgotten—and to this day they make ends meet through public appearances.

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Attacks on Litvinenko and small, sometimes illegal, jobs. To learn about their views on life, you can watch a video interview with Alexander Gusak500 —one of Litvinenko's former commanders, who in 1998 worked with him to uncover a conspiracy in the Ural Po. Gusak recounts how, in pretrial detention, he ended up in the same cell where the revolutionary Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Cheka, had once been imprisoned. This fact so pierced Gusak that he realized the infallibility of the "office." The former death squad officer then boasts that his personal smoking pipe once belonged to that same Dzerzhinsky. The tears in Gusak's eyes make it clear: he is spiritually captivated by the fact that he held in his lips the same object that another state assassin had held in his mouth a century before. It's a lucky pipe, Gusak says: after his prison term, he left it with his cellmate, a police officer involved in the very same "White Arrow" case investigated in Smolensk. As soon as he touched the mouthpiece to his lips, freedom descended upon him, too. Russian history is sometimes not only frightening, but also amusing.

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4. The FSB blows everything up

How Putin became a hostage

hostages he did not save

It's hard to imagine, but people once got their news from Russian television. In September 1999, for example, this was the case in the family of one of the authors of this book. The house hadn't yet been connected to the internet, and the television was in a prominent place. In the morning, before going to work, I, like millions of Muscovites, watched the news.

The September 9th episode shocked and stunned me. A nine-story apartment building in Pechatniki exploded at midnight, where ordinary people were sleeping peacefully. It was already clear early in the morning that many residents had died. It was also clear that the building had been blown up deliberately, with explosives planted in the foundation of the structure, most likely in the basement. I rented an apartment in a similar nine-story building in Novye Cheryomushki, which by Moscow standards isn't very far from Pechatniki, and both districts are full of similar apartment buildings. At the entrance to my building, there was also a door leading to the basement. I never inquired about what was inside—and perhaps I shouldn't have. Similar

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These were the thoughts that swirled through the minds of many Muscovites and residents of other cities at that moment. Millions of Russians suddenly realized that only chance had saved them from death, and that there might not be another chance. It became scary.

The first building exploded on September 4th, on Levanevsky Street in Buynaksk, Dagestan. Sixty-four people died. This happened in the Caucasus, where
There were terrorist attacks, and seven military families lived in that building. Maybe that's why civilians somewhere in Moscow weren't alarmed by what happened.

At midnight on September 8th-9th, the first explosion in Moscow occurred—the same one in Pechatniki, on Guryanova Street. It completely destroyed two of
The explosion destroyed six entrances of a nine-story building and significantly damaged a neighboring building. 106 people were killed. The country declared a national day of mourning on September 13.

Early in the morning of the day of mourning, around five o'clock, an eight-story, single-entrance building at the very beginning of Kashirskoye Highway exploded and completely collapsed. Almost all of its residents—124 people—were killed in the terrorist attack. Most likely, in their sleep. This last detail frightened television viewers.

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perhaps most powerfully: the next morning any of us may not wake up. In the houses of the be-
Residents were on duty, some were sleeping in their cars. Concerned people checked basements and utility rooms. The police did the same, but there are thousands of high-rise residential buildings in Russia.

September 16, three minutes to six in the morning, Volgodonsk, Rostov Oblast. A truck packed with explosives, parked near building 35 on Oktyabrskoye Highway, detonates. It's a nine-story building with four entrances. Nineteen people are killed.

century - there are fewer victims than before, only because the bomb was placed outside the building, and not inside, as in the two previous episodes.

It became clear almost immediately that in all cases (except Buinaksk, discussed below), the explosives were disguised as bags of bulk material, primarily sugar, which were stored in rented utility rooms or in a truck. It was fairly easy to identify those who rented the premises. The testimony of the landlord on Guryanova Street, according to the official version 501, pointed to a Karachay citizen, Achimez Gochiayev, who had a cover passport in the name

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The deceased man, Mukhit Laipanov, was found. Gochiyaev's accomplices were quickly identified—the same people rented premises in Pechatniki and on Kashirka, and they also purchased and bombed a truck in Volgodonsk. The circumstances of the Buinaksk explosion were different: the perpetrators were residents of Dagestan, unconnected to Gochiyaev.

No one rented an apartment there; a GAZ truck containing bags of "silver paint" simply pulled up to the building. Investigators would later link this explosion to the others through the figure of one of the Chechen separatist leaders, the Islamic fundamentalist Khattab, who, according to the official version, gave the orders for the entire series of terrorist attacks. Among other things, this version supposedly explained the need for a military operation in Chechnya and certain areas of Dagestan.

We won't delve into the details of the investigation or the drama of the people who lost loved ones, shelter, and livelihood in those terrorist attacks. This episode in recent history deserves a separate book, which can only be written when investigators are free to work in Russia, including with currently classified FSB documents.

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But it's worth saying this: the apartment bombings of the fall of 1999 are also a cold case. Of course, there was an investigation, the perpetrators of the attacks were identified, and even their "organizers" in Chechnya—like Khattab—were named and later killed. But the investigation left crucial questions unanswered, so it's fair to call this a cold case. Most of the questions centered on a terrifying episode on September 22, 1999, in Ryazan. There, local residents, alarmed by the latest news, exercised vigilance—they reported a suspicious trio of people unloading sacks in the basement of a high-rise building on Novoselov Street. The police arrived on the scene, followed by all the other law enforcement agencies, including the Ryazan security service. The three perpetrators (a woman and two men) were no longer there; eyewitness accounts were used to create a composite sketch of them. According to one version, some of them were even detained later that night.502 Bags found in the building were found to contain explosive particles using rapid testing. Residents were urgently evacuated, and the bags were taken to a special FSB testing site.

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After which the people were returned to their apartments. It seemed no one understood what it was all the next day. The TV news reported on the foiled terrorist attack in Ryazan, even Putin

During his press conference, he managed to comment on this, praising citizens for their attentiveness.503 But the FSB, whose purview includes investigating such cases, remained silent. And on September 24, something even stranger happened. TV journalists attended a government meeting, where they managed to catch, one after another, first Interior Minister Vladimir Rushailo and then FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev.504 The former boasted of "preventing the explosion of an apartment building." Then Patrushev, speaking next, suddenly said: these were anti-terrorist exercises, there were no explosives in the bags, and the "terrorists" were employees of his department (if they were detained, they were quietly released). It looked provocative: for almost two days, all the officials and security forces, including the president and the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, were boasting about the thwarted terrorist attack, but it was as if it had never been planned. When journalists and ordinary people overcame the first

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Confused, they began asking questions that the "office" never answered. For all the 25 years that have passed since then.

— What was the plan for the exercise? What document regulated it? What was supposed to happen if the vigilant residents hadn't noticed the explosives being planted?

— Who are the employees who were portraying "terrorists", where are they and why not present them to the public if the exercises have already been successfully completed?

— Where did the bags of bulk material go and why did the initial analysis show the presence of explosives in them?

— Why were the exercises reported only later? two days?

These questions were so obvious that many people started looking for answers to them - journals ologists, lawyers, politicians, and even ordinary people, those very same people who believe in the secret power of the special services. The phrase "Ryazan sugar" has become commonly used to denote a cunning provocation by the special services against the citizens of their own country. Mikhail Trepashkin, a former FSB investigator,

who was first kicked out of the "office", and then

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He was beaten for attempting to protest his dismissal and became a lawyer for people whose relatives died in the explosion on Guryanova Street. Alexander Litvinenko, Trepashkin's colleague at the November 1998 press conference we described, co-authored the aforementioned book "The FSB Blows Up Russia" with historian Yuri Felshtinsky. Its first chapters began to be published in Novaya Gazeta in the summer of 2001. Yuri Shchekochikhin, a journalist for the same newspaper, also began his own investigation into the events of 1999. A public commission to investigate the terrorist attacks was also established—it even included State Duma deputies (something that would be unimaginable now!).

For years to come, these people—and many others who also tried to understand the events of that September—became targets for the Russian authorities. It seemed that investigating the terrorist attacks themselves was less of a priority for the security services than persecuting those who disputed the official version of events.

March 24, 2000. Two days remain until the first presidential election, which Vladimir Putin will win. On the NTV channel, at that time,

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The program "Independent Investigation" was broadcast on the TV show "Independent Investigation"506, which belonged to oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky. Residents of a building on Novoselov Street in Ryazan, politicians, journalists, invited experts, and three delegates from the FSB gathered in the studio. The FSB's arguments seemed frankly weak; it was clear to almost every viewer that they were holding something back. If you watch the broadcast carefully, curious details will emerge. One of the guests suddenly asked a question: why were the participants discussing the failed explosion in Ryazan, without mentioning the terrorist attacks that actually took place in Moscow under completely identical circumstances? The host, without letting the questioner finish, declared that they would not talk about the events in Moscow, where over 200 people died. Why? The country had suffered the most horrific terrorist attacks in its entire history—why shouldn't they be discussed? The answer is simple: the Kremlin threatened the television crews. As two people familiar with that story recall507, the authorities learned about the preparation of the program and perceived it as an attempt by Gusinsky to influence the results of the presidential elections, to spoil the first political

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Putin's political triumph (the oligarch supported Yeltsin and Putin's rivals in 1999, so this interpretation was plausible). Gusinsky was warned to think ten times before airing the program, especially before the day of the national vote. We don't know how these negotiations went, but the result was as follows. The program was eventually aired less than two days before the election, but the producers made a significant compromise with the FSB. First, they didn't mention the Moscow explosions on air. Second, a man appeared in the studio who, introducing himself as a resident of the building on Novoselov Street, categorically asserted that there had been no attempted terrorist attack (how would he have known that?), and then suddenly accused NTV of coercing witnesses to criticize the "office." Right there on air, thanks to vigilant Ryazan residents, it became clear that it wasn't the resident of the mined house, but an unknown person. Finally, the third surprising scene of that broadcast: at one point, the host invites everyone to watch "a video received from Ryazan." The minute-long recording shows a man with a short haircut, sitting with his head back

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The man, facing the camera, says he was one of the "terrorists" who conducted training exercises in Ryazan. In front of him, facing the camera, sits a blonde woman with a microphone and papers spread out on the table. The recording contains no names or identification information. It doesn't say who filmed it, where, or when, and the name of the journalist interviewing the key witness is not disclosed. We now know that her name is Olga Chulyaeva. In 1999, she was a rookie correspondent for the Ryazan state television channel, and immediately afterward, she built a distinguished political career in her home region—until very recently, she was responsible for censorship in Ryazan. The "terrorist" himself doesn't reveal a single unique detail, and in fact, after showing the video, the presenter immediately forgets about it —even though this very recording could have been the key to the investigation. Years later, we spoke about this broadcast with NTV's then-head, Yevgeny Kiselev. He admitted that, at the request of the Kremlin or the FSB, the channel's owner might have agreed to "certain favors, for example, not to talk about the apartment bombings or to show operational video footage."508

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But this was still censorship-light. Subsequently, the authorities would simply not allow anything reminiscent of the suspicious events in Ryazan to appear in the Russian media. For example, in September 2009, exactly 10 years after the terrorist attacks, journalist Scott Anderson published an article in the American magazine GQ titled "Vladimir Putin's Dark Rise to Power."509 The article asked the same reasonable questions: why didn't the authorities investigate the events in Ryazan more thoroughly, why were there so many inconsistencies in the story, and so on. But here's the problem: the article was not published in the Russian version of the magazine, then headed by fashion writer Nikolai Uskov. He told the press that he had decided not to publish the text because "there was nothing sensational in it" for a Russian audience.510 It's unexpected to hear this from Uskov, a historian by profession, in relation to the most tragic and mysterious episode in Russia's modern history. Trepashkin, who had already suffered a fair amount from the "office," in 2002 became a defendant in a criminal case for disclosing state secrets (for

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(He spoke by phone with Alexander Litvinenko, who had already left the country—including in connection with the apartment building bombing case). In a short period of time, Trepashkin was charged with three articles of the Criminal Code, the last of which was for weapons possession—a few days before the start of the trial of the perpetrators of the Moscow terrorist attacks. As Trepashkin himself recounted, he was planning to testify at the trial, proving the FSB's involvement in the incident.511 But he was unable to speak because he was stopped, seemingly by accident, at a traffic police checkpoint in the Moscow region, and a pistol was found under his seat. Trepashkin claimed that the weapon had been planted, and this was effectively confirmed during the investigation.

During the investigation, witnesses admitted that they only saw the gun in the hands of police officers.512 Be that as it may, Trepashkin was sent to prison—he received four years. Even in the penal colony, they continued to demonstratively mock him. One day, he was granted parole, released from custody, and the former Chekist even managed to get home. But then his parole was revoked and Trepashkin was sent back to the zone. Even at the end of 2007, there were some minor misdeeds.

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It was the year Trepashkin was finally released from prison. He was escorted out of the prison gates several hours before those who met him were informed. The former Chekist took a minibus to the city.

By this time, his former colleague Alexander Litvinenko had already died in London as a result of radioactive poisoning. Litvinenko's co-author of the book "The FSB Blows Up Russia," Yuri Felshtinsky, suddenly fell ill in late 2007 while in Paris on business. Felshtinsky had not visited Russia since 2000, residing permanently in the United States. In 2007, a year after his co-author's poisoning, the writer needed a short trip to Paris. On the last day of his French voyage, Felshtinsky felt seriously unwell, "chills, weakness, like a bad case of the flu." After reaching London by train, the writer underwent tests and, barely feeling any better, flew home to Boston. However, soon the samples arrived from Britain, and FBI vehicles and toxicology experts rushed to Felshtinsky's house. Years later, Felshtinsky told this story to the authors of this article for the first time.

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books513. The tests revealed multiple organ failure, "as if everything was failing," Felshtinsky recalls. A family doctor in the US, knowing his line of work, suggested reporting the incident to law enforcement. They took all sorts of samples from Felshtinsky's home, and he himself underwent numerous tests. No traces of poisoning were ultimately found, which is why, as Felshtinsky says, he didn't tell the story publicly at the time. At some point, the number of poisonings—real, imaginary, and those disguised as natural illness or death—became so high that Felshtinsky's embarrassment now seems like naivety.

Novaya Gazeta journalist Yuri Shchekochikhin was a star in his field. And not only in his field. Back in the 1990s, democratic trends brought the reporter into parliament. In both the State Duma and the newspaper, Shchekochikhin did roughly the same thing—investigating corruption and abuse of power. His stories caused major scandals, and many of his topics were highly controversial. Naturally, after the September 1999 apartment bombings, they also became a topic of discussion.

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Shchekochikhin. He was involved not only as a journalist but also as a member of that very same public commission investigating the terrorist attacks. On June 17, 2003, Shchekochikhin was in Ryazan, the birthplace of the infamous "sugar." The reporter called the editor-in-chief and complained of ill health. He was advised to go home. Two days later, in Moscow, the journalist's condition worsened even further and he was hospitalized. Events then unfolded rapidly and terribly—roughly the same thing we've already described in the stories about Tsepov and Litvinenko. His skin peeled, his hair fell out, his organs failed one after another—a "sudden aging effect," as doctors would call it.514 Shchekochikhin died on July 3 without regaining consciousness. A video recording of his funeral shows a centenarian with yellowed skin stretched tightly. Shchekochikhin was 53 years old.

Suspicions that the journalist and deputy had been poisoned began to surface almost immediately after his death. But the authorities insisted that his death was natural. Doctors would attribute the cause of death to "Lyell's syndrome," a severe and brief allergic reaction, but that it...

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No one has ever determined what it was. The deceased's colleagues have attempted several investigations, even exhuming Shchekochikhin's body once, but to no avail. Most likely, traces of the toxic substance, if there was one, have long since disappeared.

One of the journalists working at Novaya Gazeta at the time recalls his emotions: "After Shchekochikhin, other colleagues would be killed, but Yuri Petrovich was the first *(in fact, Novaya Gazeta employee Igor Domnikov was killed back in 2000 – author's note).* For the first time, I was scared. Before, there was euphoria, but from that moment on, there was fear."515 Fear, fear – these are the exact words to describe the result Shchekochikhin's likely poisoners were aiming for. And they chose their target unmistakably. In parallel with his investigation of the apartment building bombings, Shchekochikhin became deeply involved in another FSB-related story.

On October 23, 2002, a large group of terrorists of Chechen origin seized the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow. The musical "Nord-Ost" was playing at the time, and the theater was packed. The terrorists captured more than 900

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hostages. On October 26, the theater was stormed using a toxic substance, which, according to the plan, was supposed to knock out the terrorists, preventing them from detonating the bombs. In practice, the gas released through the ventilation knocked out not only the terrorists, but also most of the hostages. After shooting the unconscious militants,

The attackers were faced with the fact that there was simply no one to provide assistance to the unconscious hostages. The rescue operation failed: there was a shortage of medical personnel and transport, doctors
they didn't know what substance they were dealing with
and, consequently, how to resuscitate the victims. At least 130 hostages died, although higher figures were also mentioned - up to 174 people (we will still explain such a significant difference in estimates)516. "Nord-Ost" (as this terrorist attack was nicknamed by the people) surpassed the bombings of apartment buildings in its tragedy, becoming the largest terrorist attack in Russia in terms of the number of simultaneous victims - each new disaster brought more and more deaths. Everyone who followed the events at that time

walking on TV news, the image of an evacuation bus, inside which

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hostages sit and lie, unconscious or in serious condition, with faces distorted by poisoning

state—heads thrown back, tongues sunken. Many of these people will die before receiving help. For example, 13-year-old Sasha Letyago died when she was thrown onto a bus during the evacuation, and several other unconscious bodies were hastily piled on top of her. By the time she reached the hospital, the girl had been crushed to death, although many of those lying on top of her had likely also died.

As with the terrorist attacks in high-rise buildings, we won't delve into the details of the Nord-Ost investigation now. Suffice it to say that even a cursory examination reveals numerous unanswered questions and suspicious details. It's no wonder that researchers investigating this terrorist attack are unsure of even two fundamental figures—the number of terrorists and the number of fatalities. These inconsistencies have convinced some researchers that the Chekists were allegedly behind the plot at some point, hoping to boost Putin's approval ratings. The time will come when someone will finally be able to tell the whole truth about the Dubrovka hostage crisis.

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And now we will tell you about something no less terrible, the details of which we know exactly.

"It was as if Patrushev had shit himself. He was gone," said a former high-ranking official.519 In October 2002, he was busy, as he himself puts it, "correcting the political consequences of the terrorist attack." The hostage-taking occurred late on a Wednesday evening—when the workday had ended and the officials had already gone home. An emergency meeting was convened in the Kremlin, but our interlocutor says he didn't see Patrushev there. By all indications, this case was the prerogative of the FSB, so the absence of the director of this special service seemed odd. A few days later, the NTV channel aired a curious video recording without sound—

Presumably, it was taken the night after the hostage taking. It's footage from the presidential press service: it shows Putin and Patrushev, briefly conversing. Journalists asked sign language interpreters to lip-read their remarks—it's highly likely that the two were discussing the possibility of Putin and Patrushev arriving "on site," presumably referring to the operation headquarters.

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But Putin didn't go anywhere. Patrushev also seemed to have disappeared. The Kremlin was so...
They were angry at the television crews for threatening them to remove the recording of the conversation from the air.521

Patrushev delegated his friend from Karelia, Vladimir Pronichev, who at the time was serving as deputy director of the FSB, to lead the hostage rescue task force. Generally, the law doesn't stipulate the rank of officials responsible for leading counterterrorism operations. But it was logical that the largest terrorist attack at the time, especially one that had occurred just a few kilometers from the Kremlin, would be handled by a high-ranking security official, such as the head of the FSB or the Ministry of Internal Affairs. When Chechen separatists took hostages in Budyonnovsk in 1995, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin personally negotiated with them (moreover, at that moment he was literally the head of state, because President Boris Yeltsin was on a trip abroad, during which the prime minister acted as his deputy), while the operation on the ground was led by Interior Minister Viktor Erin and FSB head Sergei Stepashin. As we already

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recalled that hostage rescue operation
ended just as shamefully as the Nord-Ost operation years later. True, there was a difference: Erin and Stepashin paid for the failure with their jobs. Under the new tsar, officials and security officials no longer had to take such career risks. This was very Putin-like. The same official who dealt with the "political consequences" of the events at Dubrovka describes this trait of the president this way: "He never punished a subordinate for failure, for corruption, for obvious stupidity or meanness." No matter how many people died and whose fault it was, "Putin's personnel policy never changes," the interviewee explains. People's lives are not important,

the prestige of the "office" is incomparable for him
more valuable.

On the evening of the same day as the assault, Putin's address to the nation was broadcast on Russian television. It lasted less than two and a half minutes. Advisers recommended that the president address the nation with a personal, emotional speech, focusing on condolences to the victims. Putin rejected this idea—text

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He wrote the main outlines of the speech himself, borrowing only the phrase "forgive us" from speechwriters. What he was asking for forgiveness for remained unclear. The rest of Putin's speech was bureaucratic jargon and a collection of slogans.

Years later, the president's hypocrisy reached a new low. When Putin needed to be re-elected in 2018, he told the Rossiya television channel that the Nord-Ost terrorists had planned to herd the hostages onto buses, take them to Red Square, and then demonstratively execute them. It sounded like an inexplicable vision—no one had ever spoken of such plans before. And how could Putin have possibly known about the terrorists' plans if not a single one had been captured alive?

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A rare photo from the presidential photo service with the following caption: “The President of the Russian Federation after receiving news of the release of hostages on October 26, 2002.”
kremlin.ru

The photo released by the Kremlin after the terrorist attack seemed to scream: the president was moved to tears by the tragedy. The true circumstances of this photo shoot have not been established, but it is important to know this: although more than a hundred people died from gas during the storming of the theater, Putin never acknowledged the fact that the cause (even indirectly) of the traged

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The actions of the FSB became the cause. People, according to Putin, died from “dehydration, chronic diseases, the very fact that they had to stay in that building”524. In other words, if he plans

Kal, having learned about the assault, still continued to lie.

Naturally, he didn't punish either Patrushev or Pronichev. Even though he had every reason to do so. Not only was the gas attack horribly poorly planned, but the investigation uncovered some truly glaring facts. First, there was Movzar Barayev, the leader of the terrorists who seized the theater. He had

arrived in Moscow some time before the attack. Barayev (according to the investigation, using forged documents) settled in building 30/2 on Veernaya Street in Moscow. 525 It would seem a minor detail. But the fact is that the building in question is a restricted area belonging to the Presidential Property Management Department. Apartments there were only given to Kremlin staffers or high-ranking officials from the regions. Access to the building was through two checkpoints manned by security forces. A pass to enter this building must be ordered in advance, he recalled in a conversation with the authors.

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Mairbek Vachagaev, a former adviser to the President of Ichkeria (Chechnya), who lived in this house in 1999–
In the 2000s,526. So, Barayev, one of Chechnya's most wanted field commanders, simply moved into an apartment in the Kremlin building, presenting fake documents? This is either a conspiracy or unimaginable unprofessionalism on the part of the security forces. No one was punished for this; it's a cold case.

Secondly, it was obvious to everyone that the negotiations The thieves and terrorists and the siege of the theater building were organized at an unprofessional level. Now, the television footage of those days looks simply implausible: one after another, more than 20 completely different and sometimes completely inexplicable pairs enter and exit the building.

lamenters - politicians, singers, journalists, television personalities, and doctors. The courage and sincerity of these people are undeniable, but nevertheless
It remains unclear what role many of them played in the negotiations. Yes, most likely, none. Almost anyone could have entered the building. In less than three days of the theater siege, three completely random people got in without any problems, and were killed by the terrorists for it. The husband

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A court official donned his uniform and went to the theater to offer himself as a hostage in place of civilians. The terrorists shot him dead as he approached the building. He was a hero, but the country could have done without his sacrifice if security forces had worked more diligently at the scene of the attack. After the first victim, there was a second. A young woman lived next door to the seized theater and thought she could convince the terrorists to release the hostages. She, too, was shot. She performed a heroic act, while the FSB leadership showed themselves to be unprofessional cowards. The third to enter the theater was a 39-year-old crane operator who worked at a Moscow construction site. This man had a personal tragedy: he deeply loved his son, Roman, who had been living with his mother since his parents' divorce. The longing for his son took on painful forms after the father saw the first television reports from the seized theater. For some reason, the man assumed his son was among the hostages. Without thinking twice, the father turned himself in to the militants, who killed him too. The case file even contains rare video footage of the hero running into the theater.

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into the hall shouting, "Roman Gennadievich!" (that's his son's full name).527 The militants overpower him and lead him out, followed by gunshots. The dead daredevil will later be mistaken for one of the terrorists; his body—nameless, with only a serial number—

cremated. The identity of the deceased will be established by chance only seven months later. This is one illustration of the quality of the investigation: there are still disputes about the exact number of hostages killed (there were probably unaccounted for spectators in the hall), and the uncertainty about the number of terrorists gave rise to numerous rumors - as if some of the villains managed to escape from the theater.528 Of course, the incident shocked the country. Several State Duma

deputies even wanted to convene a parliamentary commission, but the Kremlin did not allow it. Then some of these deputies - for example, Yuri Shchekochikhin - began to help the relatives of the victims. This was the first experience of its kind: the families of the victims, dissatisfied with the investigation of the terrorist attack, created an unofficial commission. They initiated legal proceedings and conducted their own investigation. Journalist Shchekochikhin simultaneously learned a sensational story: it turned out

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It turned out that, following the failed operation, Putin, by secret decree, awarded Hero of Russia stars (that is, the highest state orders) to two of Patrushev's closest subordinates: Vladimir Pronichev (the same friend from Karelia who led the operation's headquarters) and Alexander Tikhonov (who commanded the FSB special forces). Another star, presumably, went to an unnamed chemist, a gas specialist who killed the terrorists and hostages. In March 2003, Shchekochikhin published an article about this . 529 Not only was it simply provocative—rewarding people whose actions led to the deaths of more than a hundred people. Shchekochikhin's article was doubly humiliating for the "office" because it described infighting within the agency. The special forces officers who rescued people complained to a journalist that they weren't being rewarded, but rather Patrushev's associates, who, on the contrary, deserved punishment. It's something reminiscent of that press conference in 1998, when Litvinenko and company aired the squabble within the "office" publicly. Putin, as you may recall, was very angry about it at the time.

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Chikhin will die a terrible death four months after the release of his, probably, most important
articles.

* * *

A new disaster struck in September 2004. It brought with it not only another record number of victims but also a previously unfamiliar shade of fear—fear for children. On the morning of September 1 of that year, militants sent by field commander Shamil Basayev seized a school in the North Ossetian city of Beslan and held it for the next three days. The terrorists held over 1,100 hostages at one time, more than any terrorist group in the world had ever held. Most of the hostages were children, from high school students to the very young, brought by their parents to a festive assembly marking the start of the school year. The news from Beslan was watched with horror not only in Russia but throughout the world. The terrorists' main demand was de facto recognition of the independence of Chechnya, the birthplace of Shamil Basayev.

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After two days of extremely difficult negotiations, during which several people (including mothers with infants) managed to escape from the seized school, the building was stormed, either accidentally, poorly prepared, or secretly planned by the security services. Regardless of which version is correct, the storming was horrific in terms of its consequences: 334 people died in the school that day, half of whom were

children, the rest are teachers and parents, rescuers and special forces.

Once again, we won't focus on the details of that bloody day—many high-quality investigations have already been written about it, and even more will come out after Putin's fall. However, we will reveal much about the events in Beslan that has remained unknown until now. Because Beslan is, perhaps, the culmination of our book, the ultimate manifestation of the worst qualities of Putin's court: cowardice, cruelty, and unprofessionalism.

and tricks.

The tragedy that claimed the lives of hundreds of people touched almost every family in North Ossetia. Relatives of the victims, barely having buried their loved ones,

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Questions began to be asked, most of them very unpleasant for the Kremlin. Everything immediately became public—numerous journalists, Russian and foreign, were working in Beslan during the terrorist attack and in the first months after it. This created problems for Putin's government. Moreover, the events in Beslan overlapped with another story that cost Putin many points in his approval ratings. From the summer of 2004 to early 2005, the country was undergoing a campaign of so-called "monetization of benefits." This was the name given to the abolition of non-monetary bonuses for employees that remained from Soviet times (not only and not so much for civil servants, but also for military personnel, doctors, teachers, pensioners, and so on—that is, a very significant portion of the country's population). Due to the "monetization of benefits," Putin's ratings began to decline as early as the summer of 2004, and by early 2005, they had reached their lowest level since the fall of 1999.531 This was compounded by the challenge that almost all of North Ossetia, although not the largest, but a historically volatile region in the Caucasus, blamed the central government for the deaths of their children.

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We haven't mentioned this fact yet, but it's important to note now: Vladimir Putin is very fond of his electoral ratings and is very upset when they drop. It's no exaggeration to say that Putin is obsessed with his own approval ratings.532 This seems somewhat absurd for an authoritarian dictatorship, in which the head of state can take credit for almost any election result, but the fact remains. In the early years of Putin's rule, those close to him were sometimes even afraid to share polling data with him if they showed a decline in popular support for the president. Later, when political competition completely disappeared in Russia, sociologists from the state-run VTsI-OM, out of caution, stopped regularly asking Russians who they would vote for in the next election.533 In other words, they simply stopped comparing the incumbent president to other politicians. This whole obsession ended with the Central Election Commission giving the Tsar an unprecedented 87% in the 2024 elections, Putin's last election to date.

Taking into account all that has been said, the authorities had to react to the Beslan tragedy with a little more energy.

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more effectively than they probably intended. At the end of September 2004, for the first and last time under Putin, a parliamentary commission to investigate socially significant events was created.534 This is an effective mechanism, not uncommon in democracies, for investigating high-profile incidents in which the state may be involved. Parliamentary commissions in many countries are good because they are independent of the executive and judicial branches and are directly accountable to voters. As we have said, under Putin, the authorities blocked the establishment of such commissions, for example, after the Nord-Ost. But then a cunning plan was hatched in the Kremlin.

"In mid-September, Boris Gryzlov *(then the Speaker of the State Duma – author's note) suddenly called me.* He said that I was being asked to join the Beslan commission. I asked,

Am I right in understanding that this is an offer I can't refuse? They told me: that's right. I replied: I'd consider it an honor!" These are the memoirs of Akhmed Bilalov, a former State Duma deputy.535 He is an invaluable source on this topic.536 A native of Dagestan, he created the business back in the 90s, and from the beg-

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A member of the Putin era became a member of parliament. In this capacity, in 2004, he joined the parliamentary commission investigating the Beslan events. Almost 20 years later, Bilalov told the authors of this book for the first time what really happened behind closed doors. Together with earlier testimony, this is a valuable source of information about what happened.

The commission was filled with parliamentarians who had previously served in various security agencies, and several people originally from the Caucasus were added. The Kremlin had little to fear from the parliament's composition. The pro-Putin United Russia party (to which Bilalov and most of the other members of the Beslan commission belonged) won an unprecedented 304 seats out of 450. The other parties that made it into the State Duma were also affiliated with the Kremlin in one form or another and therefore posed no real threat to its interests. For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, representatives of the democratic camp failed to enter parliament. [The text appears to be incomplete and likely a mistranslation.] Previously, it was they who had stirred up trouble, for example, by attempting to investigate the apartment bombings and the terrorist attack on Dubrovka.

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In short, the Kremlin's plan seemed flawless: loyal and dependent deputies and senators would quickly confirm the official version of events in Beslan, society would calm down, and Putin's approval ratings would again rise. To ensure the commission's sterility, its head was appointed to be Alexander Torshin, then deputy speaker of the Federation Council. He was a 51-year-old man with a remarkably unremarkable appearance and biography. A former colleague of Torshin's says he likely collaborated with the secret services back in the 1980s, when he rose from one low-ranking position in the Communist Party apparatus to another . With Putin's rise, the career of this unremarkable bureaucrat literally took off. He was delegated to the Federation Council by Leonid Markelov, the same head of the Mari El Republic, a thief and obscurantist whose astonishing story we told at the beginning of this book. This brought Torshin new opportunities: using his status as a senator, he became a prominent lobbyist, working with tobacco and alcohol companies, as well as with bandits. In short, at the head of the commission on

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The person least worthy of the post was chosen to investigate the worst terrorist attack in Russian history. But even this wasn't enough at the top. To ensure greater oversight, they also included KGB veteran Rudik Iskuzhin, a senator from Bashkortostan. His colleagues knew he had once studied with Putin at the KGB academy and had maintained personal contact with the Russian president ever since. In other words, the parliamentary commission wasn't even a fraction of a percent independent of the executive branch.

But even so, the Kremlin's plan began to falter. "We flew to Beslan the day after the first commission meeting. There were traces of fresh blood everywhere. People in civilian clothes and armed men were walking the streets. Porfiryich *(Alexander Porfiryevich Torshin – author's note)* immediately understood and told us it would be difficult," Bilalov recalls.

The first question that immediately arose even among the ultra-loyal members of the commission, who led the negotiations with the terrorists, and then the assault? “The commission included brave generals like Vitaly Margelov *(former deputy director*

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"The Foreign Intelligence Service, the son of the first commander-in-chief of the Airborne Forces—author's note). They started asking questions: 'Who's in charge? Why wasn't Patrushev at the scene of the terrorist attack?'" Bilalov recalls. Something ugly came to light: on September 1, the FSB director, on Putin's orders, arrived in Beslan, but didn't even leave the airport and almost immediately flew back to Moscow. Speaking to the commission behind closed doors, Patrushev responded: "We feared a deterioration in the situation in other regions and therefore had to monitor the situation globally."539 "It became clear that the FSB had screwed up. Not a bad start to the investigation," Bilalov says, repeating verbatim the words of another former government official who told us about the events at Nord-Ost.

However, this was far from the height of cowardice. The investigation revealed that, de facto, two parallel headquarters operated in Beslan. The official headquarters of the operation was appointed head of the FSB for North Ossetia, Valery Andreyev. But behind him, others, higher in rank and position, were working. In particular, three deputy directors

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The FSB—Generals Pronichev and Tikhonov, who botched the Nord-Ost operation, as well as another old friend of Patrushev's, General Vladimir Anisimov. We mentioned this man when we talked about Patrushev's Karelian period. Anisimov, or Gavrilych, as he was then called, a tractor driver by training (he would later graduate from a political academy), began his career at the Petrozavodsk KGB as a driver, holding the rank of ensign. After moving to Moscow, Patrushev invited Gavrilych to join him: as of 2003, he was responsible for the FSB's own security, meaning he was responsible for ensuring the prestige of the agency was not undermined. When the commission members inquired about Anisimov's activities at headquarters, no one in the FSB could provide a coherent answer. Meanwhile, this man played one of the main roles in the Beslan drama.

The commission never fully determined Anisimov's physical location during the terrorist attack. Some officials said he was working in Beslan, while others doubted it. According to Bilalov, Patrushev's former driver was in Vladikavkaz during the operation, at the 58th Army headquarters, from where he issued orders.

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Almost immediately after the school was seized, terrorists They conveyed their conditions—they wanted to speak with four people. They named North Ossetian President Alexander Dzasokhov (who arrived at the scene of the terrorist attack that morning and, judging by numerous testimonies, was ready to go to the school), doctor Leonid Roshal (who later also flew to Beslan and was ready to enter the seized school), Russian presidential adviser Aslambek Aslakhanov (who spoke with the terrorists by telephone but arrived late in Beslan), and the head of Ingushetia, FSB General Murat Zyazikov (who did not show up in Beslan, was not in contact, and spent the entire three days of the terrorist attack at his residence in Nazran, not appearing in public541). Based on the testimony of the only militant who survived the assault, the commission determined that the terrorists were prepared to release 300 hostages if Dzasokhov and Zyazikov arrived. 542 "Why didn't you come and save the children?!" Bilalov recalls, during that conversation, the retired generals literally yelled at Zyazikov, who snapped back rudely. He told the commission members that he had received orders from his superiors not to show himself under any circumstances.

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at school, because, "according to operational data," the militants were planning to shoot him. "Who ordered you not to come to Beslan?" they asked him. Zyazikov replied: "State secret!" "Was it Anisimov?" they asked him. Zyazikov remained silent. "It became clear to everyone that this is how it happened," Bilalov now says. If you're confused by the chain of FSB agents, let's simplify the chain as much as possible:

the head of the FSB was afraid to work in Beslan and sent his former driver there; the latter, once on the scene, was also afraid of responsibility and ran the headquarters from behind the scenes; when the opportunity arose to save at least one of the hostages, Patrushev's former driver ordered Zyazikov to hide better, which he, again out of fear, readily complied with. The perfect chain of decision-making, based on cowardice and unprofessionalism. It's also important to remember that at the time of the terrorist attack, Zyazikov was the elected head of a Russian region (of course, those elections in Ingushetia were grossly falsified, but nevertheless!). By law, Zyazikov answered to his constituents, but in reality, he answered to the adjutant of the FSB director.

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"Even if you died there as an officer, you would have saved 150 children," according to Bilalov, a commission member with a higher rank than the Chekist told Zyazikov. At one point, Anisimov arrived for a meeting with the parliamentarians. "He acted arrogantly. When asked where you had been, he replied, 'I was where I needed to be.' To most questions, he replied, 'That's a state secret.'" The situation escalated, and it was defused by the most absurd member of the commission, seemingly specifically delegated by the Kremlin to render its work meaningless. This deputy's name was Oleg Malyshkin; he had entered the State Duma as a member of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, or, more precisely, as its leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky's bodyguard. Malyshkin has no views, no knowledge, no skills worthy of mention, except perhaps that he is a master of sports in football. During the most tense moments, like the interrogation of Anisimov, Malyshkin repeatedly suggested to his colleagues that they go play ball. "It became clear that the commission would be unable to find the culprits and would bury the very idea of parliamentary investigations. Veterans from all law enforcement and emergency agencies, including the Ministry of Health, were delegated to it."

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"And everyone was covering for their own," Bilalov recalls. "It became clear that someone would have to be blamed, and two well-known Ingush, Ruslan Aushev and Mikhail Gutseriev, were ideal for this role for the FSB." Aushev, a former military general, had been president

of Ingushetia before Zyazikov and, unlike the latter, enjoyed widespread support and respect in the republic. After the school seizure, he arrived in Beslan and went into the building as a parliamentarian, from which he managed to evacuate several mothers with infants. Gutseriev, at the time a wealthy businessman of Ingush origin, also arrived at headquarters and, through relatives, established contact with the Ingush militants. Gutseriev had a personal conflict with Zyazikov, so he, too, seemed a desirable target for the FSB.

At 34, Bilalov was the youngest

a member of the commission, and, as he recalls, he was always given unpleasant tasks. It was he who was asked to convey to Aushev the demand that he appear before the commission for questioning. “Aushev said he wouldn’t go: ‘My conscience is clear, I did everything I could.’ I told him that I considered him a hero, but if they

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"If they accuse him, then new hostility will flare up between the Ingush and Ossetians," Bilalov recalls. Aushev eventually met with three members of the commission and told them to examine the video recording of my conversation with the militants. The commission was surprised: what video recording? Suddenly, it turned out that a video camera had indeed been found in the destroyed building, on which the militants had recorded what was happening inside. The recording was restored, and Aushev's conversation with the terrorists was translated from Vainakh. 543 In it, Aushev demands that the militants release their youngest children with him. This was truly heroic behavior. Aushev and Gutseriev had nothing to charge. Bilalov clearly remembers how one of Patrushev's employees angrily snapped at him: "Maybe we should award them medals now too?!"

According to Bilalov, the FSB was thereby trying to divert attention from its own failures. In the fall of 2004, he recalls, the commission members had a more or less complete picture: chaos reigned in Beslan during the terrorist attack, the army and the security services were not cooperating, everyone was trying to call Moscow, and rescuers...

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Medics and firefighters were unprepared, resulting in many deaths. Valery Zangionov, the authorized negotiator from the official headquarters, was completely unaware of the parallel negotiations taking place behind his back and was not privy to the "secret headquarters"' plans. "Few people remember this, but at the very beginning of the siege, soldiers from the 58th Army fired on an FSB helicopter flying over Beslan. It miraculously landed. They all went crazy there, as if a war had begun," our interlocutor recalls.

But the main problem arose when the commission
She took it upon herself to answer the question of what had triggered the assault. The official version, which the authorities released almost immediately after the attack, was that at around 1 p.m. on September 3, for some reason, one of the bombs that the militants had planted went off.
They were held in the school gymnasium, where most of the hostages were being held. A fire broke out, and after some time, security forces were forced to launch a hostage rescue operation, which is why it turned out to be so problematic: many special forces officers and hostages were killed, as they were carried out of the burning school by civilians and in personal cars.

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they were taken to hospitals that were unprepared for such a turn of events. “We are with this *(official —*
"Author's note. We had already arrived in Beslan. They put us up in the best hotel. 'Don't worry,' they said," recalls Bilalov. The only one who immediately began to act "according to the individual program" was State Duma deputy Yuri Savelyev from the left-wing Rodina party. Before joining the parliamentary commission, Savelyev had not shown any signs of being a rebel. He was a staunch communist, a fighter against the "Western backstage," but the deaths of his children likely broke something within him—this is how Marina Litvinovich, a journalist and activist working in Beslan at the time, describes Savelyev's behavior in a conversation with the authors. It's also possible, however, that his rebellion was prompted by a personal conflict with FSB Director Patrushev.
The fact is that until 2002, Savelyev worked in St. Petersburg as the rector of one of the country's largest defense universities, Voenmekh. But then, amid scandal, Savelyev was replaced by Patrushev's friend, Viktor Yurakov.

“While we were at the hotel, Savelyev had already started climbing into the houses around the school. He was the first

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"I found used tubes from Shmel flamethrowers in the attic of one of the buildings across from the destroyed gymnasium," Bilalov recounts. Savelyev wasn't just a deputy; he was a doctor of science, a bomb expert, and a ballistics expert who personally participated in the testing of various types of weapons. After examining the circumstances of the incident in the gymnasium, Savelyev concluded that the explosion was likely caused by a flamethrower. According to local residents, special forces had holed up in the attic where the tubes were found during the siege. This was a serious accusation. A conflict arose within the commission, and the youngest deputy, Bilalov, was again sent to resolve it. During a private conversation, Savelyev said, "Don't you understand what's going on here?!" Twenty years after the terrorist attack in Beslan, we asked Bilalov whether he now believes Savelyev's version that the assault was triggered by a shot from special forces. "Yes, I rather believe it. The people inside were doomed," he replied.

In the end, Savelyev refused to submit to the will of the majority and, when the commission issued its final report, published his dissenting opinion (under

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under the influence of his arguments, another deputy did not sign the official report -
Communist Yuri Ivanov)545. Besides the episode about the first shot, Savelyev disagreed with his colleagues on other points, from the number of militants to the degree of responsibility of the operation's leaders. "Then they tried to gloss over the scandal. They said, 'What can you expect from him? He's a member of Rodina, the opposition, they need sensationalism.' Other experts were shown on television who refuted his words," says Bilalov.

However, even this is not the end of the large-scale disgrace. From the testimony of those involved in the operation and journalistic investigations, it emerged that the "accidental assault" began shortly before the expected arrival of Chechen separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov in Beslan. The fact is that several negotiators simultaneously contacted Maskhadov, that is, formally speaking, the commander of all Chechen detachments, through their own channels and without notifying the FSB. Judging from the testimony of these people, Maskhadov, who was hiding from the security services at the time somewhere in Chechnya, was ready to join the re-

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talks and even come to Beslan for this. Some-
Some journalists and politicians suggested that the FSB wanted to disrupt its sworn enemy's involvement in rescuing the children and therefore provoked the bloody assault.547 This theory found support among many Beslan residents who lost loved ones in the terrorist attack. A spontaneous public organization, "Mothers of Beslan," emerged in the city—it consisted primarily of women whose relatives died at the school. They demanded a fair investigation, which greatly displeased the Kremlin. We asked Bilalov whether the commission had looked into the incident with Maskhadov's failed visit. He replied that during its entire work, Maskhadov "was mentioned only a couple of times." Parliamentarians preferred not to meet with the Beslan mothers at all. A difficult task fell to Bilalov again: he was asked to attend a meeting alone with Ossetian women who had gathered at the House of Journalists in Moscow.

The parliamentary committee presented its final report.
The mission presented its findings only more than two years after the terrorist attack.548 As journalists noted ,549 Torshin’s text almost duplicated the official conclusions.

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The investigation: Maskhadov himself is named in a document as the organizer of the school attack.550 "When they realized the full horror, the report was simply turned into a formal reply. Otherwise, a bunch of people would have been jailed," says Bilalov. Not a single FSB leader was punished. Some officers, as after the Nord-Ost, received new ranks and appointments. Zyazikov was not reprimanded for cowardice, for the corruption that flourished under his rule in Ingushetia, or for dozens of other crimes, including serious ones. In 2008, he flew from Moscow to the republic on the same flight as the well-known journalist and human rights activist Magomed Yevloyev. Yevloyev was a fierce critic of Zyazikov. What happened between them on board is unknown, but Yevloyev was arrested by Ingush security forces as he left the airport. What happened in the car where the journalist was shoved is also unknown, but soon he was dumped, still alive, with a bullet hole in his temple, near a hospital in Nazran. Yevloyev died shortly thereafter. Ingush authorities reported that it was an accidental shot fired during a struggle started by the detainee himself.551 Zyazikov's role in the crime is unknown .

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was investigated. After leaving his post as head of the republic in 2008, the FSB general continued to work in government service—he is now the Russian ambassador to Cyprus, a country of exceptional importance for Russian corrupt officials (companies linked to Russian officials and security forces are incorporated in Cyprus. For example, one of Putin's personal "wallets"—the Ermira company, which we covered earlier—is registered there).

After Beslan, Vladimir Anisimov served as deputy director of the FSB for almost another year, and then, as a reserve officer, took a management position at the private company "Mercury," where he is still employed. It is enough to know about this company that it is the secret "wallet" of Nikolai Patrushev, his family, and entourage. 552 That is, Anisimov worked, and continues to work, as an adjutant to his Karelian boss. Somehow, years later, Anisimov ended up in the criminal news. He was found, drunk to the point of unconsciousness, in a Moscow entertainment establishment, where he regularly spent time with escort girls, to whom he owed a lot of money.

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neg. The senior FSB officer was found to be carrying foreign documents in his name553.

Cheka-OGPU

No investigation was conducted into this incident either. The authorities' decision to remain silent about everything is one of the most important and horrific outcomes of Beslan. On the morning of the second day of the siege, the authorities officially announced that 354 people were being held in the school. No matter how officials later justified this, it was an obvious lie.

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and an attempt to conceal the reality, probably to avoid frightening the country with the real number of hostages. Among other things, this lie led to the terrorists inside the school going berserk and refusing the hostages food and drink. In order to coordinate information management, in other words, to distort the truth, they specially brought to Beslan

Dmitry Peskov, deputy press secretary of the Russian president, was flying (he will become an important character in the final part of the book). This seems quite symbolic. Why would one of the presidential press secretaries go to Beslan if neither Putin nor other Kremlin officials were there? With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the KGB (later the FSB) realized the need to work with the press. The importance of this area for the "office" is demonstrated by the fact that the KGB Public Relations Center (PRC) occupied privileged premises on the third floor of the central office of the special service on Lubyanka Square - including the former office of Yuri Andropov, the idol of all the Chekists. 554 In the 90s, the "office" even acquired its own face - Alexander Zdanovich, both a Chekist and a historian, who commented on the events on television

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resonant events. It was he who, on NTV, tried (but unconvincingly) to disabuse Russians of the idea that a building in Ryazan had almost blown up. Then Zdanovich was made one of the heads of state television—he no longer had to justify himself on air, but could tailor the television broadcast to his own whim. Over time, even such

They decided to curtail the partial openness completely, so the name of the current head of the Public Relations Center is unknown to ordinary people.555 And why should we know him if the de facto head of the FSB became the country's president and moved to the Kremlin? From this point of view, Peskov's participation in the Beslan events

tiyakh is very logical.

The day after the bloody assault, one of the central newspapers, Izvestia, published a shocking photograph that took up the entire front page. It showed a Beslan militiaman carrying a wounded girl he had rescued from the burning school. Izvestia was the only newspaper to report it.

The central newspapers named the true number of hostages. The Kremlin could not forgive this. 556 The editor-in-chief, Raf Shakirov, was fired .

poured for 24 hours at the insistence of the administration

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The president's position was taken over, and the newspaper was soon sold to people close to Putin. It was with Izvestia that the total purge of Russian print media would begin, which we'll discuss in more detail in the next part.

books.

Cover of the Izvestia newspaper, September 4, 2004

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The spontaneously united Beslan mothers also became enemies of the authorities. A year after the terrorist attack, the "Mothers of Beslan" organization, not without "help" from Moscow, split into two structures—one relatively loyal to the authorities, and another that continues to demand punishment for the perpetrators and a full investigation. The latter were turned into outcasts; journalist and activist Marina Litvinovich, who helped the mothers seek justice, was once beaten in the street with the words, "You have to be more careful, Marina" (naturally, a cold case).557 But even with the former mothers, Putin has no

It turns out that he met with them only twice in the 20 years since the terrorist attack (in that same 2005 and in August 2024). In both cases, the Kremlin carefully screened out the participants in the conversation - to make it easier for the president to avoid answering questions. A short video distributed after the second meeting558 is very expressive.

interesting: while talking to three women sitting opposite him, Putin barely looks at them - he looks at the table, then to the side, then at the ceiling. A former Putin confidant, who watched the start of his

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Putin, who spent his presidential career in Beslan, describes this characteristic of the Russian tsar thus: "He's not about human emotions. It's difficult for him to speak the language of the people."559 Over the past 20 years, Putin has never once flown to Beslan for the memorial ceremony in early September, when the burned-out school building, now a memorial, is transformed into a sea of flowers and black clothes. In fact, Putin, no matter what he said publicly, drew only conclusions from the Beslan tragedy that were personally advantageous to him. Soon after the bloody assault, the Russian president announced the abolition of direct elections for regional leaders—from that moment on, they were appointed by the head of state. This was presented as if Beslan demonstrated the weakness of popularly elected leaders and the confusion within the vertical power structure. Once again: confusion! Putin disappeared, Patrushev disappeared, Anisimov disappeared, Zyazikov disappeared, who knows who launched the assault, and hundreds of people died as a result—that's what true confusion and cowardice looked like, but Putin wasn't deterred. As early as 2005, he reapp

It is here that it is worth mentioning another important aspect of Putin's nature. He does not recognize

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without a single mistake. We studied hundreds of his speeches, interviews, and remarks for all sorts of television programs and films. The result is easily described by a short quote from Putin himself, taken at a press conference in 2012: "Looking back, would you really want to correct something? I speak absolutely sincerely: if that had happened, I would say so now."560 The courtiers indulged the leader's self-confidence beyond measure. Putin's long-time aide Igor Sechin once said without unnecessary affectation: "Honestly speaking, I don't know of a single mistake he made in all these years."561 Sechin was sometimes caught lying even in public appearances, so the words "honestly speaking" were not superfluous.

* * *

Akhmed Bilalov, Andrei Illarionov, and Yevgeny Savostyanov left government service and fled Russia at different times and under different circumstances. Each, to varying degrees, remained an enemy of Putin and the Russian authorities. Illarionov says that at one point, he traveled

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to Russia to see relatives and friends. There, he noticed he was being followed, and one day, he received a warning from his sources that "they had decided to finish him off."562 Because of such confessions, ordinary people and journalists began to regard Illarionov, Trepashkin (the only one of the FSB enemies described above who remained in Russia), and other people of this ilk as "hysterical people" or "holy fools." However, the events of the next chapter will show that their fears were likely much closer to reality than those who considered themselves sane.

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5. Chronic pancreatitis

Is Putin afraid?

"I was afraid I'd be poisoned," Yevgeny Savostyanov, whom we've quoted extensively in the chapters above, told the authors of this book.563 This is how he described his experiences when, in the early 1990s, he joined the KGB as a civilian. "I have a habit of touching the doorknob of my house only with gloves, just in case," the same Akhmed Bilalov, who now lives in America, once told us.564

For a time, such fears could be attributed to the influence of writers and filmmakers, who repeatedly portrayed Soviet spies as treacherous poisoners. But under President Putin, a long series of events occurred that turned the movie into reality.

Can secret services commit murder? Of course, yes. For centuries, professional assassins under various rulers have struggled with a more complex task: how to dispatch an undesirable person to the next world in a way that makes their death appear natural. In the 1980s, Professor

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A doctor from Dresden, East Germany, was given access to a study on a similar topic.
How to fake suicides using poisoning. Interesting variations were described: the use of radioactive substances, and the more traditional arsenic poisoning, though during sexual intercourse. We don't know the professor's name or the research data. But we do know that information about him was leaked to the KGB's Dresden residency, specifically—

Putin approached the young officer. He, in turn, asked the Stasi, the East German secret police, to help him "persuade" the professor to share his scientific work. The method chosen was entirely in Putin's style—planting a pornographic video on the scientist (hello, Prosecutor General Skuratov!) and, under threat of discredit, forcing him to hand over the necessary papers. Former Stasi agent Klaus Zuchold, who publicized this story years later, didn't know how Putin's scheme ended. 565 Neither do we. But it's worth noting: the young Putin's professional interests corresponded to the passions of his employers. Both Putin and the Soviet secret services were fascinated with poisons.

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At one of the closed Soviet enterprises back in the 1970s, chemists would regularly look into each other's eyes during experiments. They were checking themselves for miosis, or constriction of the pupil. Miosis is one of the first signs of exposure to the nerve agent that chemists dubbed "Novichok." The amusing name for the brutal killer was apparently chosen precisely because of the novelty of what happened in Shikhany in the early 1970s. At that time, in this closed town on the Volga, a new organophosphorus poisoning agent was first synthesized by order of the Ministry of Defense. Organophosphates had long been known as poisons (German chemists had invented the poisons sarin and soman in the first half of the century), but "Novichok" was far more toxic than the most well-known nerve agent at the time, VX.

Miosis was only the first symptom. Then—
and very quickly, the victim's nervous system was damaged, convulsions and vomiting began,
breathing stopped, and eventually death almost inevitably occurred. Even if a person

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If they had saved him, he could have been left disabled—the damage to his liver and nervous system was irreversible. In 1987, scientist Andrei Zheleznyakov discovered that his pupils had constricted. “Guys, I think I’m in trouble,” he said.567 They were able to help Zheleznyakov at the Sklifosovsky Institute, but

He was unable to cure it completely—the chemist died five years later from the effects of poisoning. However, this did not stop the experiments.

The military's ideas about using Novichok were unseasonably bloodthirsty. By the late 1980s, they had learned to produce the lethal substance in large quantities and load it into medium- and long-range missiles for the mass poisoning of enemy troops. This didn't fit into the "new thinking" policy, as the warming relations with the West were called during Mikhail Gorbachev's time. Soon, our country signed the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the missiles had to be destroyed. But the story of Novichok, and indeed other poisons, couldn't end there.

The KGB was more interested in precision assassinations - not regiments and divisions

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Not an enemy, but specific individuals considered undesirable in some way. Grigory Mairanovsky likely laid the foundations for the secret toxicology program of the domestic intelligence services back in the 1930s. His unit within the NKVD, judging by the scant historical evidence, appears to have tested poisons on people sentenced to death and also killed several well-known enemies of Soviet power (Mairanovsky's men were even credited with the murder of the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg).568 Time passed. In September 1978, Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov was standing at a bus stop in London when he suddenly felt a prick in his thigh. A stranger with an umbrella nearby apologized for his awkwardness and disappeared into the crowd. Markov soon developed a fever, began vomiting, and then continued to do so, and his kidneys failed, from which he died shortly thereafter. After the autopsy, a microcapsule containing poison was found in Markov's body, not Novichok, but ricin. It turned out that the stranger at the bus stop was a Bulgarian intelligence officer, and he had administered the injection with the very umbrella Markov had noticed. He had orchestrated this.

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A sophisticated assassination, of course, not by the Bulgarian, but by the Soviet KGB. [569] Even before Markov, the "Kontora" attempted to poison the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn with the same poison and using the same technology (an injection in a crowd, a microcapsule with the active substance). After the assassination attempt in Novocherkassk in 1971, he experienced health problems, but was not seriously injured.

Novichok likely fell into the hands of security officers during the Soviet era—at least, the KGB and the army collaborated in the production of poisons back then.570 But the substance was used for its first secret assassination in 1995. Then, in Moscow, banker Ivan Kivelidi and his secretary died with suspicious symptoms. It was the young woman's death that suggested the use of poison: had it not happened, Kivelidi's sudden illness would have been attributed to his long-standing kidney problems. This is the greatest horror of Novichok—we may not know all the people killed and maimed by it, because each incident could easily be disguised as health problems, kidney failure, diabetes, pancreatitis, and so on down the list of serious illnesses.

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It turned out that Kivelidi and his assistant were killed by a nerve agent, presumably applied to the membrane in a landline telephone receiver. Kivelidi's business partner will be convicted of the murder. The investigation into that case remains full of unanswered questions, but that's not even important right now. What matters is that, according to investigators, the perpetrator obtained the secret poison through a convoluted means from a former employee of that very same institute in Shikhany. In other words, it turns out that Novichok, invented in the 1970s, still exists and is so convenient that it can be used to almost undetected poison not enemy soldiers on the battlefield, but civilians living and working among us. Since Putin's rise to power, such casualties have increased. We described the death of Yuri Shchekochikhin in the summer of 2003, the death of Roman Tsepov in September

2004, and the painful end of Alexander Litvinenko in November 2006. Amid these irreparable losses, the general public also barely noticed the suspicious illness of journalist Anna Politkovskaya (more about her in the next chapter), which prevented her from flying to the terrorist-held city in 2004.

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school in Beslan, ending up instead in a Rostov hospital with traces of unknown toxins in his body.572 Then, in September 2004, pro-Western presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko was allegedly poisoned in Kiev - as a result, the well-groomed face of a still young man was disfigured by hamartomas (benign skin growths). This would have a strong impact on the course of the election campaign, but Yushchenko would ultimately become president anyway - to the displeasure of Moscow. Finally, very few people remember that in 2006, shortly after the murder of Litvinenko in England, Russian politician, economist, and former Prime Minister of our country Yegor Gaidar, who had arrived there on business, was urgently hospitalized in neighboring Ireland. He would survive and even publicly say that his poisoning was beneficial to the enemies of the Russian leadership.573 In fact ,

Indeed, in far from all the cases described here, the involvement of the Russian authorities, or even the fact of poisoning itself, has been proven. And certainly not all cold cases are connected with Novichok. We ourselves, as

journalists observed these stories with professionalism.

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with a vested interest, meaning a more passionate one than the average person. And even we didn't see the trend back then: Putin's enemies were dying or suffering from sudden illnesses, not only in Russia but also abroad. Sooner or later, something was bound to happen that would bring this mass of disparate facts into a frightening system. And we needed someone to look at these facts with a fresh eye. That person was our colleague, a journalist with Bulgarian roots, Hristo Grozev.

This will happen after Dmitry Medvedev's presidency (2008–2012), during which a moratorium on extrajudicial killings and suspicious cold cases was ostensibly declared. Putin was then serving as prime minister and, by law, had no authority over the security agencies (it's difficult to judge how much this was observed in reality. Putin was certainly a far more influential prime minister than all other heads of the Russian government combined). However, as soon as he returned to the presidency, cold cases with a toxic odor began to occur one after another.

Here are just a few of them.

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2012 год	**Александр Перепеличный**, предприниматель. Информатор по делу Сергея Магнитского	Умер в Великобритании. «Синдром внезапной смерти от аритмии»[574]
2015 и 2017 годы	**Владимир Кара-Мурза**, журналист и политик, убеждавший западные страны ввести санкции против виновных в гибели Магнитского	Дважды госпитализировался в Москве с подозрением на сердечную и почечную недостаточность. «Острая интоксикация неустановленным веществом»[575]
3 февраля 2016 года	**Вячеслав Синев**, бывший глава антидопингового агентства РУСАДА. После его увольнения стало известно о массовом злоупотреблении допингом среди российских спортсменов	Умер. Детали неизвестны
14 февраля 2016 года	**Никита Камаев**, еще один бывший руководитель РУСАДА, уволившийся после допингового скандала	По официальной версии, умер дома после пробежки на лыжах[576]. «Произошедшее похоже на обширный инфаркт. Я никогда не слышал, чтобы он раньше жаловался на сердце»[577]
2018 год	**Петр Верзилов**, участник группы Pussy Riot и один из основателей издания «Медиазона»	Госпитализирован, прошел реабилитацию в Германии. «С высокой долей вероятности (можно сказать), что он был отравлен»[578]

574 575 576 577 578

The five people mentioned above were clearly either under suspicion or had scores to settle in power - for their involvement in the introduction of Western sanctions, their prominent opposition activities, and their possible involvement in a doping scandal. But there were also, it seemed,

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Unexplained deaths. In 2014–2015, Timur Kuashev, a 26-year-old human rights activist from Nalchik (Kabardino-Balkaria), and Ruslan Magomedragimov, a 45-year-old activist from Kaspiysk (Dagestan), died suddenly. Both suffered sudden heart failure. Injection marks were found on their bodies after death. These Caucasus residents were distinguished from other reported victims by their *almost complete anonymity;* neither their place of work nor their background could have suggested a sophisticated murder using poison.

Writer and poet Dmitry Bykov is incomparably more well-known, and his critical stance toward the Russian government is no secret. In April 2019, he fell ill on board a flight from Yekaterinburg to Ufa. These were two cities on his tour; before Yekaterinburg, he spent a couple of days in Novosibirsk. During the flight, Bykov began to struggle with suffocation and lost consciousness. He was taken to the hospital in a coma, and from there evacuated to Moscow, where he later regained his footing. Bykov's doctor in the capital was resuscitation specialist Alexander Polupan, who would later play a key role in the story of Putin's poisons.

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In November of that same year, 2019, 41-year-old politician Nikita Isayev boarded the Tambov-Moscow train. He suddenly became ill on the journey. He died before reaching the next station. One of the authors of this book knew this man a little, but in a way that's unexpected in the context of our chapter. The fact is that Isayev, while not a Putin supporter, was certainly not one of his critics. Early in his career, he worked as a mid-level official, then entered politics, which mostly consisted of appearing on propaganda talk shows on Russian television. Shortly before his death, we were talking about something insignificant. Isayev had scheduled the conversation at a café located precisely between the FSB and presidential administration buildings. Usually, journalists met there with officials or those who were open about their connections to the authorities (or even boasted about them). It was impossible to believe that such a man could have been killed by the Russian authorities. So we, and other Russian journalists, easily chalked up Isayev's death to a sad quirk of his health.

But there were two events that stood out from this series in their extraordinary nature. In 2018, in a quiet

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In Salisbury, England, two Russians were hospitalized with severe poisoning: former Russian military intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, who had come to visit him. They were found unconscious on the street. Fortunately, the Skripals were saved by doctors, but several other people were accidentally poisoned, and one of the victims, a Salisbury resident whose friend had picked up a suspicious perfume bottle on the street, eventually died. The motive for this incident was much more obvious than in the cases listed above. British investigators and chemists determined that the Skripals were poisoned with the same Novichok. The investigation also identified two suspicious Russian tourists who visited Salisbury on the day of the poisoning. It turned out that they flew to the UK under

fictitious names.

The second incident occurred in August 2020, when Alexei Navalny suddenly fell ill on board a plane en route from Tomsk to Moscow and eventually fell into a coma. The plane landed in Omsk, and the politician was urgently hospitalized at a local hospital.

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The same doctor Polupan who had once observed Bykov became one of the participants in the medical consultation,
He flew in from Moscow specifically for this purpose. Navalny's case opened the doctor's eyes. Polupan was the only member of the medical team who pushed for Navalny's evacuation to Germany, and later revealed details of what had happened at the hospital. Thanks to him, the entire world learned how medical authorities in Omsk tried to conceal the true nature of the poisoning. Returning to Moscow, Polupan began studying the literature on organophosphates and became convinced of the main thing: what had happened to Navalny was not a freak of health, but a deliberate poisoning. Tests conducted in Germany soon confirmed this—traces of Novichok were found in Navalny's body. Some time later, Polupan contacted Bykov to confess: the "poisoning of unknown etiology" described in the poet's medical report was most likely caused by the same Novichok.

Alexei Navalny was saved thanks to resuscitation specialist Polupan, the pilots, paramedics, his family, and the FBK team. Their heroic deed also helped journalists.

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eventually notice the scary elephant in the room

here you go.

The assassination attempt on the Skripals became the starting point for Grozev, who was then a freelance investigator at the non-profit organization Bellingcat. Together with journalists from several publications, he identified the real names of the Russians who had applied poison to the handle of the front door of the Skripals' home in Salisbury: military intelligence officers from the GRU, Alexander Mishkin and Anatoly Chepiga. By following their contact information, the investigators were able to establish the names

four institutes that continued the Soviet Novichok research program. The main one was the State Research Institute of Military Medicine in St. Petersburg, subordinate to the Ministry of Defense: it was this structure that played a key role in creating the poison that was intended to kill the Skripals. Military doctors were assisted by the Moscow scientific center Signal, subordinate to the Federal Service for Technical and Export Control and, as a cover, developing sports drinks, as well as the 27th Scientific Center of the Ministry of Defense and the 33rd Central Scientific Research and Testing

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The research institute in Shikhany, where Novichok originated. Knowing these names

helped Grozev track down Navalny's poisoners—the Signal Center and the 33rd Research Institute were again involved in this operation. The main "work" was carried out by a squad of at least eight assassins from a secret unit of the FSB's Forensic Science Institute—apparently the heirs of the people who once invented the umbrella injection. Grozev established their names, movements, and connections using "probivo," that is, by purchasing their cell phone billing information on the black market. His investigation, published in the winter of 2020, became a worldwide sensation.

What happens next is even more terrifying. Grozev and his co-authors used a retrospective method to trace the careers of the FSB killers. And a shocking discovery was made: Navalny's poisoners had, at a minimum, frequented the same places as Bykov, Isaev, Kuashev, and Magomedragimov, and, at a maximum, had been specifically following them in order to kill them.583 The precise motives for each of the assassination attempts and murders remain to be determined. According to one theory,584 Isaev could have become

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A victim of poisoning simply because his age, build, and health resembled Navalny's, and he was simply used to test the required dosage of Novichok. The motive for the attack on Skripal is also ambiguous: several years before the poisoning, the former intelligence officer was released from prison and extradited abroad in exchange for Russian spies detained in the United States. Prior to this, Skripal spent five years behind bars in Russia, where they could have done anything to him. But they only did so years later in Britain, where, despite all the risks, a squad of professional killers had to be dispatched. Why was it so difficult? Some believe that Skripal was poisoned not for past treason or because he remained a bearer of secrets, but as part of a so-called "show performance." It was as if the Russian secret services wanted to demonstrate to defectors and the Western countries that had sheltered them that Putin's death squads had long arms and the most poisonous test tubes. And, by the way, not only test tubes. Under Putin, the security services also killed abroad using more conventional means—bullets and bombs. For example, Chechens

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Chechen separatist Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev was blown up in Qatar in 2004. Another former Chechen militant, Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, was shot dead in Berlin in 2019. Based on the results of Grozev's investigations, the head

of the

A frightening picture arose: inconspicuous killers with fake passports can kill anyone and anywhere, they can poison, they can shoot, they are capable of taking the lives of you and your loved ones simply for show purposes -

Or because your height and weight are suitable for their experiments. It became scary, like back in September 1999.

During the same days that Grozev began searching for Navalny's poisoners, we were trying to find out what the Kremlin knew about the incident. Only a day and a half had passed since his emergency hospitalization, Navalny lay in a coma in distant Omsk, and few people around him knew what was happening. We contacted Sergei Novikov, the head of one of the departments in Putin's administration. In response, Novikov sent one of the authors of this book a photocopy of Navalny's medical reports. It's unlikely that such a document even existed at that time.

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The patient's family. Forgetting doctor-patient confidentiality, Novikov wrote: the tests show nothing suspicious. When asked why, in his opinion, Navalny ended up in a coma, the official responded with lightning speed: pancreatitis. Within hours, state propagandists, Kremlin-linked media outlets, and bloggers picked up the pancreatitis story, which quickly became "chronic" and even acquired its own legend—the story goes that Navalny drank moonshine in the village of Kaftanchikovo the day before his flight, overloading his already worn-out pancreas, and this is the result. In reality, Navalny very rarely drank alcohol, and he had never been diagnosed with chronic pancreatitis in its life-threatening form. Of course, Novikov and all the propagandists subordinate to him at that moment, like us, did not know exactly what had happened to Navalny. But the system built by Putin forced them to lie, so to speak.

To say, by definition, is to lie and discredit anyone who is against the Tsar. Chronic pancreatitis is a disease that many people who abuse alcohol. In Russia, with its level of drunkenness, almost every TV viewer knows this fact. When Bykov

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While he was lying in a coma in a Ufa hospital, the Kremlin-connected Channel Five came up with a bogus diagnosis for him too: "encephalopathy due to type 2 diabetes."587 This version was also peddled. In reality, the writer does not and never had diabetes. "They just decided I was fat and must have diabetes," Bykov laughs loudly when we meet him in the US years later.588 He still writes good books. However, amid the din of propaganda, an alarm bell rang in the Bykov poisoning case. Soon after his discharge from the hospital, one of the authors of this book met with a source of his from among those commonly referred to as "close to the Kremlin" -

These aren't officials, but the authorities' henchmen (political strategists and PR people) who attend important meetings and are therefore aware of the mood at the top. Quoting such interlocutors should always be done with doubly caution, but sometimes these very people become sources of crucial insider information. The interlocutor in question then casually said: Bykov's "illness" is a deliberate poisoning. I, Mikhail Rubin, asked again

forces, who, according to his information, could have done such a thing?

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sew. He quietly pronounced the name—Prigozhin. Now we know for sure that our interlocutor was mistaken (possibly deliberately) —the FSB was behind the assassination attempt on Bykov. But his mistake was very telling. Yevgeny Prigozhin, the man the source was referring to, is the perfect historical figure to illustrate both Putin's cruelty and fear.

The shortest description of Prigogine is
A sadist. Each of us wrote several high-profile investigations about him, and each time it felt like a safari. One source asked for a meeting abroad, when this wasn't yet a mandatory security requirement in Russia. Another described how a specially hired "executioner" beat up Prigozhin's employees on the boss's orders right in the basement of his headquarters. What's more, Prigozhin's subordinates staged demonstrative executions—in Syria and Ukraine, where they fought as mercenaries. A photograph of heads cut off by these mercenaries from African rebels adorned Prigozhin's opulent office . 589 Wait, but where does a sadist get the money to pay mercenaries, maintain a headquarters, and thousands of

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employees? And not every scumbag has a separate office.

Prigozhin is one of those we would, without a shadow of a doubt, classify as one of the president's "bandits." He is nine years younger than Putin, but grew up in a similarly disadvantaged environment. The choice facing young Yevgeny was simple: rise through sports (as Putin did) or quickly, bypassing higher education, turn to crime (as the president's tatami acquaintances, Leonid Usvyatsov or Arkady Rotenberg, did). Prigozhin tried to combine both—in his youth, he was a skilled skier (his stepfather, Samuil Zharkoi, was a respected coach in this discipline) and even enrolled in an Olympic reserve sports boarding school. But Prigozhin never became a skiing king. At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, a young athlete, known at the time by the criminal nickname Zhako, decided to rob and steal, for which he was twice prosecuted. While investigating Prigozhin's activities, we once stumbled upon interesting details of his early biography and realized that something was clearly wrong with this man. For example, it turned out that

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that Prigozhin robbed the apartments of his acquaintances, and in one case, he even tried to break into the home of a girl he was dating. Zhako was caught strangling a random passerby with his bare hands until she lost consciousness. Now, knowing Prigozhin's subsequent track record, it's easy to explain such excesses by his penchant for violence. And back then, the young ski-

Nika was sent to prison for re-education -
A 19-year-old man received 13 years in a labor camp. The entire youth is behind bars.

Soviet and Russian prisons rarely reformed anyone, but they brought a curious change to Prigozhin. No, he didn't repent or cease being a sadistic outcast. He made criminal connections, got a tattoo on his back, and lost a phalanx of the ring finger on his left hand (this is important). But he was no longer a thug! Released in 1990, Prigozhin found himself in a country where big money could be made not only through theft and robbery. Thanks to his cunning and his stepfather's connections in the Jewish community, Prigozhin got a job with Mikhail Ebraeli.

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Mirilashvili, at the time the king of St. Petersburg's gambling and restaurant business. A motley crew of criminals and thieving officials swarmed around the casinos and bars, and Prigozhin established connections with them all. His restaurants, "Novy Ostrov" and "Old Customs," were frequented by the entire St. Petersburg elite of the 1990s. Putin also frequented th

It was then that the two met - in all

In fact, during Putin's first two presidential terms, they already knew each other so well that the president would make friendly jokes about Prigozhin's baldness during banquets. The word "banquet" doesn't necessarily mean that Putin and Prigozhin broke bread together. But Prigozhin nonetheless found himself at Putin's side more often than some of his dining companions. The point is that Prigozhin literally became Putin's cook and server—the man who provided for state banquets. Journalists initially attached a slightly ironic meaning to the phrase "Putin's chef": a pathetic lackey in a white cap. But in vain. Food and related leisure activities (often private) are an exceptionally important and intimate sphere of presidential life: Putin once

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He admitted that all his chefs are employed by the Federal Protective Service, meaning they wear epaulettes and adhere to strict protocols. In any regime like Putin's, the person the dictator entrusts with his food is crucial. It's not a matter of, God forbid, the chef mistaking scallops for chicken (as you already know, Putin can handle that), but rather, making sure the chef doesn't put anything into the monarch's food that would be unbearable. The Russian leader knows a thing or two about this—his grandfather cooked for the families of Lenin and Stalin in their residences outside Moscow. Putin proudly recounted that his ancestor wasn't even touched by the repressions. "They treasured them, knowing that these were people who wouldn't let them down," he said.

the president boasted. Apparently, he thought the same about Prigozhin—he wouldn't let him down. The presidential handyman built a huge business on this trust.

His companies became not only the organizers of official banquets; over time, they began to receive government contracts en masse for feeding (and later for cleaning, heating, and so on) for the army, schools, and hospitals.

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across the country. This was a colossal amount of money, making the man in the white cap fabulously rich and influential.

You might ask how journalists could know how Putin teased Prigozhin during private dinners. The answer to this question reveals yet another facet of the presidential chef's morbid nature. The fact is, Prigozhin jotted down every detail of his meetings with Putin, even the most insignificant ones, in his emails. About ten years ago, hackers published a trove of Prigozhin's email correspondence—it was there that he bragged about how the Russian leader was amused by his bald head. 593 An even more telling detail was also found there. Prigozhin boasted in a letter to his secretary that during lunch he had been granted the privilege of... placing a napkin on Putin's lap. And Putin said to him, "How are you, Zhenya?" That's the end of the episode. Most likely, Prigozhin sent these notes to his assistant with the simple goal of saving them for the future, and then, probably, turning them into a book of memoirs (over the years, he became interested in writing; Prigozhin, together with his children, even published a book of children's stories594). That is, the pres-

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The Dentist chef considered the episode with the napkin on the Tsar's lap to be historically significant. Prigozhin was obsessively fixated on Putin, which, coupled with his sadism, led to terrible consequences. We don't know the circumstances.

And in what terms did the criminal conversation between these two men take place—no longer about napkins and baldness. But at some point during Putin's third term, Prigozhin became the executor of the Kremlin's dirtiest assignments. The list of these missions is well known even to readers far removed from politics: Prigozhin created an "internet troll factory" that attacked Russian...

He organized the Russian opposition and interfered in the American elections. He founded and financed a mercenary army called Wagner, which fought in Africa, Syria, and Ukraine. Finally, it was the "chef" who was behind covert operations to physically intimidate dissent within Russia. Most likely, Prigozhin himself offered his services to Putin. In any case, our source once reported that at some point the chef, at his own risk, decided to commit

wait and see the reaction from above, and when there isn’t one

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What followed, he correctly concluded that the sovereign was pleased.595 This story concerned a rather curious episode. In 2013, one of the authors of this book worked for the Russian version of Forbes magazine. The editors were then very interested in Prigozhin's inexplicable rise to wealth. Our article about "Putin's chef"596 —possibly the first in the central press—came out in March of that year and, most likely, its subject didn't like it. Around the same time, an unknown regional politician named Sergei Solovyov contacted Forbes' advertising department. He paid a considerable sum for a two-page advertisement about himself, the text of which he himself sent to the magazine. Such articles are not reviewed by the editors and are marked with a special "advertisement" notice so that readers don't confuse them with honest journalism. Today it is clear that even such a practice was evil, but at that time the Russian media were too frivolous about making money.

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Портрет современного политика

Последние десятилетия привнесли в нашу жизнь не только такие понятия, как демократизация общества, его активная капитализация, зарождение оппозиционного движения и повсеместный поиск новой национальной идеи. В водовороте политических страстей, реформ и соревнований по наращиванию личных капиталов неожиданно появились люди, которым не все равно. Сегодня они идут во власть. Как знать, возможно, именно из них и формируется новая политическая элита государства.

Сергею Соловьеву 40. За плечами – два высших образования, аспирантура и многолетняя работа в сфере строительства и маркетинга.

Как и большинство, к концу 90-х прошлого века Сергей встал перед выбором: всю жизнь работать на кого-то или попробовать начать свое дело. Он выбрал второй путь, и его первым детищем стала небольшая строительная фирма, занимающаяся выполнением договоров субподряда.

Сегодня минимперия Сергея – это строительство частных

А еще Соловьев обладает редким на сегодняшний день качеством: где бы он ни работал, всегда старался помочь людям. Так, в Нижнем Новгороде и Екатеринбурге появляются новые детские площадки, в разбитых дворах – яркие игровые городки с качелями, а в одном из районов Свердловской области скоро будет построен детский досуговый центр.

Сергей, извините, наверное, странный вопрос и все же... Зачем вы это делаете?

Я это делаю потому, что так надо. Каждый человек должен вести себя так, как считает правильным. Я придерживаюсь мнения, что человека характеризуют не слова, а поступки. Расскажу историю из жизни: как-то раз мой 9-летний сын пришел из школы и, чуть не плача, рассказал, что накануне отдал однокласснику шоколадный батончик в обмен на карточки с героями мультфильмов. Карточки ему должны были принести на следующий день, но... Оказалось, что они потерялись, а шоколадка на тот момент уже была

„Я придерживаюсь мнения, что человека характеризуют не слова, а поступки."

Forbes Magazine, No. 5, 2013

At the same time, businessman Solovyov did something similar with Novaya Gazeta and other publications, as well as with the same poet Dmitry

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Bykov.597. Solovyov invited the latter to come to the Sverdlovsk region for a pre-election speech, for which, naturally, he paid a fee. A short time passed, and media outlets linked to Prigozhin suddenly wrote "exposés" articles: supposedly, Forbes, Novaya Gazeta, Bykov, and others were for sale, and one could commission them for an article or even a solo performance. It turned out that Solovyov was a corrupt jack-of-all-trades working for Prigozhin. He filed a lawsuit against our magazine and other media outlets, arguing that he had nothing to do with the publications about himself, and that the campaign against him was orchestrated by ill-wishers in collusion with corrupt reporters. Naturally, with this provocation, Prigozhin only proved that there is advertising in the Russian media, and that artists perform for a fee. But the "chef" was clearly pleased.

flax was his first experience and over time, it seems, he began to devote much more working time to the dirt,
than food.

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Prigozhin did not hesitate to personally serve distinguished guests. Dmitry Astakhov/ TASS

In the fall of 2016, Prigozhin's men attacked the husband of Lyubov Sobol, an opposition figure close to Alexei Navalny. They injected the man with a syringe and an unidentified substance into his thigh. The victim felt unwell for several hours, but then recovered.

The volumes, as well as traces of the unknown substance, disappeared. A proper investigation was never conducted (a "cold case"). One can imagine the thoughts that swarmed through the mind of a man who knew that he was being filled with

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The attack was carried out with a syringe by the henchman of a flamboyant, sadistic criminal. Sobol's husband was tested not only for poisons, but later also for HIV, hepatitis, and other diseases that can be transmitted with a needle. Fortunately, nothing was found. Then, in the summer of 2018, bloodshed ensued. Three Russian journalists, led by renowned reporter Orkhan Dzhemal, were shot dead in the Central African Republic (CAR). The film crew had come to the country to film a story about Wagner. The investigation into the murder stalled, as Prigozhin's mercenaries controlled almost everything in the CAR at the time—a sort of export version of a cold case. But the circumstances of the tragedy that were eventually established point to Prigozhin: his men first lured the journalists to Africa and then, apparently, dealt with them.

Impunity fueled Prigozhin's sadistic nature. He began publicly threatening any critics of Putin, both in Russia and abroad. He began behaving like a spy movie adventurer, moving incognito through the corners of the country.

the world where his mercenaries fought was arranged

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provocations against journalists and politicians, periodically using specially selected doubles of himself (journalists learned to distinguish Prigozhin from the clones by the missing phalanx of a finger on his left hand). In short, in addition to fabulous wealth, Putin's state easily and casually gave the criminal part of its monopoly on violence. It was a mutually beneficial deal. In exchange, the Kremlin received not only the heads of murdered Africans, Syrians, and Ukrainians, but also the opportunity, in a pinch, to blame all the crimes on the actions of a bald man with an unstable psyche. It was not the authorities, but Prigozhin who poisoned Bykov—

That's roughly what you remember, our Kremlin-connected source told us.

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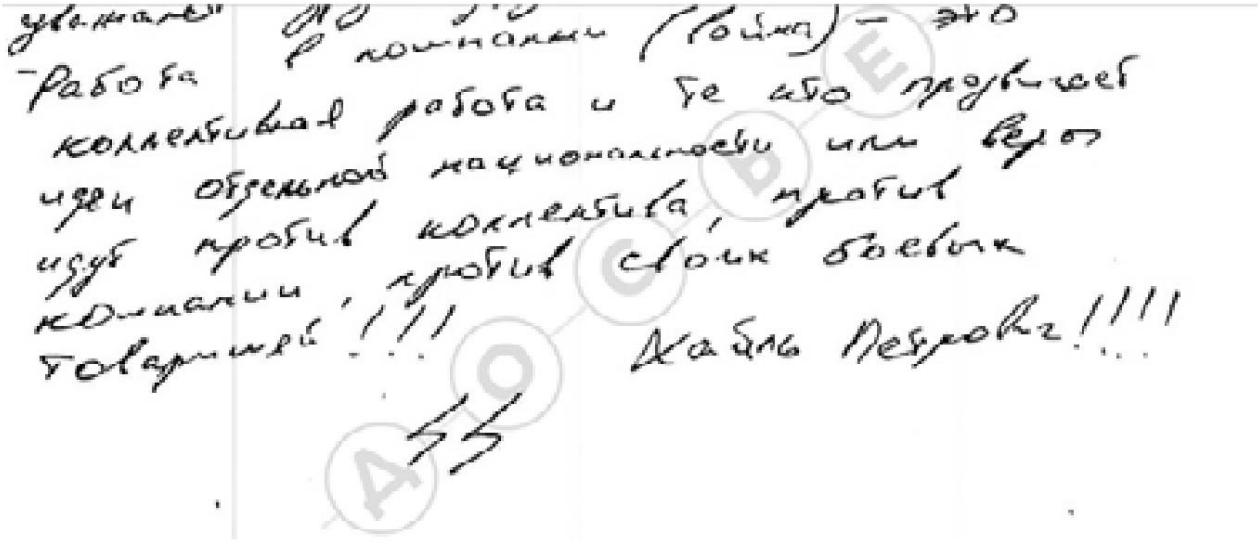

Dmitry Utkin commanded Prigozhin's troops. This man was a Nazi. He addressed Prigozhin literally as "Heil, Petrovich." As you can see from the first photo, he developed a lifelong love for SS symbols.

Dossier Center

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However, the state monopoly on violence, once delegated,

The investigation begins to divide like a cancer cell. Prigozhin and his mercenaries were not the only ones Putin gave license to commit murder and other crimes. Those closest to the Tsar succeeded. Besides the personal chef, these are, naturally, personal security guards, especially since the president, as you read above, does not particularly distinguish between these two professions. In matters of trust, Putin's court appears in a pure medieval state, without impurities. The monarch's favorites are the mar-

shawl and seneschal.

In the opening chapters, we wrote that Putin, from the very first days of his career, developed a rather close relationship with his bodyguards—and they, of course, took advantage of their boss's trust to get rich and rise in power, often abusing this opportunity (the horrific death of Roman Tsepov is an example of this). There, we also included a photograph taken in August 2000 during Putin's visit to the Pskov-Pechersky Monastery. Behind the newly elected president, there were two men—Alexei Dyulin and Alexei

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Min and Yevgeny Zinichev, Putin's personal bodyguards, or "personalniki" in Kremlin slang. Now take a look at another photograph—it's the funeral of former St. Petersburg mayor Anatoly Sobchak in February 2000, when Putin was still just a presidential candidate (the poor quality of the photo proves how long ago it was). Two strange men will catch your eye in the photo. The man behind Putin, the only one who, in the gray St. Petersburg February, thought to wear sunglasses, is Viktor Zolotov, a friend of Tse-pov's and later the longtime head of Putin's bodyguards. And the sturdy man with short hair in a leather jacket is the same Dyumin. Here, he's the only one who, for some reason, felt the need to put his foot on the fresh grave of Putin's former boss. This is probably a defensive pose—

This is how the loyal guard protected his boss from other mourners.

These two people - Zolotov and Dyumin - The main, but not the only, characters in Putin's affair with his bodyguards. While working on the book, we discussed the phenomenon of Putin's bodyguards with the American professor Stie-

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Venom Kotkin. He is the foremost expert on the biography of Joseph Stalin, a bloody dictator who lived in thrall to phobias and manias and, like Putin, fenced himself off from the people with thugs in uniform. "Putin's security is the current regime. Those who keep him fed, watered, and asleep—they're the most important," says Kotkin. It's hard to argue with that.

kremlin.ru

The main thing to understand about Putin's security guards is that they are welded together by subordination, they perceive themselves as a fighting formation, and therefore they drag each other along in any undertaking, including

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including career. Viktor Zolotov has been at the head of this system since Putin's first days. Two people who met him at different times describe our hero as a man with an unjustifiably high opinion of himself. 602 "He considers himself at least James Bond," says one of Zolotov's acquaintances (dark glasses in February, perhaps hence) 603. Before joining the security service, Zolotov worked at the Likhachev Automobile Plant in Moscow,

and in his spare time he practiced karate.

People who have encountered Putin's bodyguard, even years later, without consulting each other, give him the same description: "a bit dimwitted." When Zolotov follows his boss on business trips, he prefers to spend his time playing cards on flights, sometimes involving ministers and other officials accompanying Putin. They're playing the fool. A tall, fit officer of the Ninth, "security," KGB headquarters, Zolotov could have spent his entire career in obscurity if the

Soviet Union hadn't collapsed. In the new Russia—right on the day of its birth, August 19, 1991—the Presidential Security Service (SBP) was created, which

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which was staffed by officers from the "Nine." These were the men who guarded Boris Yeltsin outside Government House in Moscow on August 19–21, during the communist coup.

Viktor Zolotov, who perched himself on an armored personnel carrier higher than all of his colleagues in Yeltsin's security detail, rose significantly higher in his career than other former officers from the Ninth Directorate of the KGB.

Kuzmin Valentin, Chumichev Alexander/ Reuters

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Another photo of Zolotov during the coup

The new, democratic authorities of St. Petersburg couldn't afford the luxury of state security at the time. In the summer of 1991, Sobchak, along with other city hall officials, was guarded by something called the "Association 'Protection'" (only later would this "association" transform into a private security company). It was founded by Igor Minakov, a former OBKhSS officer (a Soviet police unit that combated the theft of socialist property).

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He had strong ties to the criminal underworld, where he was respectfully called Garik, and behind his back, Adolfych: for his very rare and historically unpleasant patronymic in the USSR; in the same TV series "Gangster Petersburg," Minakov was portrayed under the nickname Gena-Hitler. Adolfych staffed the ranks of "Zashchita" with athletes, criminals, and special forces officers who had been left out of work with the collapse of the USSR. To understand the specifics of Minakov's work, one must know that his employees simultaneously protected city hall officials and, for example, prostitutes operating in the...

in luxurious hotels. Soon,

Moscow decided that Sobchak's security detail alone wasn't enough and that several SBP officers needed to be delegated for this purpose. So, two handsome bodyguards found themselves alongside the mayor—Viktor Zolotov and Oleg Klimentyev (his even more unusual patronymic, Ateistovich—also

became the subject of town jokes).

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Zolotov guards Sobchak.

Yuri Belinsky/ TASS

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Oleg Klimentyev behind the backs of chess fans

Zolotov, although he had only been in St. Petersburg occasionally, quickly understood the specifics of his new place of service. We We don't know exactly how he met the a former policeman and later gangster, Roman Tsepov, but they became close. The security company "Baltic Escort," founded by Tsepov, peacefully displaced "Zashchita" from the city's security services market—now Tsepov's men were simultaneously providing security for the Sobchak family, Putin, and other officials, as well as, for example,

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The Luna strip bar and many other hot spots in St. Petersburg. In the

mid-1990s, the gangster was the main figure in the Tsepov and Zolotov pairing. The officer even worked for a time at Baltic Escort, albeit not as a rank-and-file officer, but as a security guard. The two were quite adept at trading force—always a good business in Russia. Tsepov and Zolotov provided protection for entrepreneurs, that is, for a fee (including unofficially), they guaranteed protection for large companies and individual businessmen. It would later emerge that, for example, Zolotov likely protected the semi-criminal jewelry empire Russian Gold (the name is unrelated to the surname of the "protector") from problems.604 However, there

was at least one more character in Baltic Escort who claimed a special role. Alexander Tkachenko, nicknamed "Tkach," a savvy criminal figure, started out with Tsepov as a low-level gunman, and eventually became the owner of the entertainment establishments he had previously protected. At the beginning of Putin's reign, when Zolotov and Tsepov had become incredibly influential, a partner like Tkachenko, even though he was already

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and lived in Europe, became inconvenient for them. Tsepov persuaded Tkachenko to fly to St. Petersburg, where he invited him for coffee in the lobby of the Europa Hotel. Security forces detained Tkachenko right at the table. Zolotov orchestrated

the whole thing, according to a St. Petersburg journalist who investigated this story. Ultimately, Tkachenko was sentenced to 15 years in prison, and after Tsepov's brutal death, Zolotov inherited the Baltik Escort business as the only living and free "shareholder." Naturally, as a government employee, he could not become the company's legal owner. Therefore, the security structure was entrusted to a young woman, Dina Tsilevich. You should remember her—she was Zolotov's St. Petersburg mistress, the mother of his illegitimate son, and a good friend of Putin's equally lover, Svetlana Krivonogikh. Zolotov and Putin visited these young ladies together when they were already working in Moscow.

From 2000 to 2013, Zolotov served as head of the Presidential Security Service. His right-hand man, and later successor, was the same Oleg Ateistovich Klimentyev. This was a time of extraordinary enrichment for Putin's security guards—they

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They monetized everything they could. For example, in Sochi, which is full of presidential facilities, permission from the Federal Protective Service (FSO) was required for any construction along the government highway, Kurortny Prospekt, since it is the route used by government motorcades. A glance at the map reveals that Kurortny Prospekt essentially encompasses the entire city, or rather, its wealthiest, coastal section. In other words, any construction on Sochi's most expensive land required a permit from Putin's security guards, which guaranteed them bribes. The person in charge of this money was Putin's longtime acquaintance, Gennady Lopyrev: in the 1980s, he served in the KGB in the Leningrad region and, in the new Russia, joined the presidential security service. Strictly speaking, the security agency that oversees the safety of top Russian officials is called the Federal Protective Service (FSO). The Presidential Security Service (PSS) operates within this structure. Despite its subordinate status and shared purpose, the PSS, under Zolotov, subsequently became a de facto competing agency with the FSO. Since May 2000, Yevgeny Murov, another acquaintance of Putin's from St. Petersburg, has serve

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And most of the security officers mentioned here are generally dismissed as not very bright. Murov was in charge of security at Smolny when Sobchak and Putin worked there. Putin noticed the officer, who had begun to put on weight early, and invited him to the Kremlin as soon as he came to power. They then had a revealing exchange: "What do you think about the offer to head the FSO?" Putin asked.

"As you command!" was the only thing Murov could answer.

- No, what do you think?

- As you command!

"I order you to head the Federal Protective Service," Putin concluded. Murov saluted and left.

Murov brought his colleague Lopyrev with him to his new job, who eventually became the head of the FSO for the North Caucasus—responsible for Sochi, Kuban, and the region's restive republics. An important position by Russian standards. Lopyrev oversaw the construction of Putin's dachas on the Black Sea Riviera, likely including the palace near Gelendzhik. And at Putin's official residence, "Bocharov Ruchey," Lopyrev

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He had no more, no less, than his own office. It's worth noting that, while not the most educated, all the guards—Murov, Zolotov, Lopyrev, Klimentyev, Dyumin, and others—were quite adept at the art of greed. Each of them, through nominees and relatives, owned and still owns significant businesses, sometimes criminal ones. Each of them acquired numerous luxury properties. For example, the Zolotov family, just after Putin became president, inexplicably received two hectares of land right next to Putin's residence on Rublevskoye Highway near Moscow. This is the most expensive land in Russia; Zolotov could never have earned it legally, even if he had played poker for real money instead of the Fool. Klimentyev, Dyumin, and other Praetorians acquired plots of land near him. To divert attention, these bold, strong men registered the land and businesses in the names of their wives, sisters, brothers, sons-in-law, and in-laws. This land right next to Putin's fence has become the subject of a story that is both comedic and tragic. The plot of land just across the river from Putin's dacha was acquired in the early 2000s by a young, but

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Igor Izmestyev, an energetic businessman and politician from Bashkortostan. Izmestyev is a first-class corrupt official, having simultaneously run a business and served as a member of the Federation Council. But that's acceptable in today's Russia. However, one cannot contradict the presidential guard. According to several testimonies, Zolotov was very unhappy with Izmestyev's close proximity to Putin, his noise and misbehavior. Furthermore, the senator's neighbor on the other side of the street was Nikolai Patrushev, then head of the FSB. Izmestyev was offered the chance to move out, but the brazen senator naively refused. Izmestyev, however, understood that the clouds were gathering over him, and just in case, he went to live in London, where, like many Putin patriots, he acquired expensive real estate. In 2007, he was lured (Zolotov always pulls off this trick successfully) to Kyrgyzstan, where FSB special forces arrived to pick him up. The senator was subdued and taken to Moscow, where he was quickly and procedurally sentenced to life imprisonment. At his trial, Izmestyev was charged not only with financial fraud but also with organizing murders. If murders are as true as corruption, then it turns out that

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The senator's bloody crimes didn't bother the Russian authorities until he crossed Zolotov. When requisitioning the land from the arrested Izmestyev, the Federal Protective Service initially hypocritically announced that the house would be demolished. But nothing of the sort happened. It still stands, beautiful and spacious, officially registered to the Kremlin's Directorate for Servicing the Highest Authorities. This department is responsible for the tsar's daily life. Who lives in the mansion for which a man was imprisoned until his death is unknown. But a local resident has marked the house on a public map as "Murov's dacha." As is well known, Nikolai Vlasik, Joseph Stalin's longtime chief bodyguard, was once accused of taking a bull, three heifers, and a pair of horses from local residents during the Potsdam

Conference in defeated Germany and smuggling them into the USSR. Times and the scale of the guards' enrichment have changed, but the essence remains the same.

Of course, the reason for Zolotov's impressive rise is not his professionalism or calculating mind. The true reason for Zolotov's success lies in the special structure of Putin's

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courtyard, where proximity to the leader determines almost everything (and certainly everything if the boss and his bodyguard also go to visit their mistresses together). In Dyumin's words, the security guards are a "chosen caste."610 What does the role of the "chosen" look like under Putin? Adjutants not only cover the head of state if they suddenly spot a shooter on the roof (which, by the way, has never happened, although Kremlin propaganda has claimed at least two thwarted assassination attempts on Putin). The main function of Zolotov, Dyumin, Klimentyev, and others like them is to regulate access to the president. At least two major businessmen told us.611

that, wanting an audience with the Tsar, they contacted Zolotov specifically. They say that Interim President Dmitry Medvedev was initially very surprised to learn that requests to receive important visitors were being sent not to his secretariat, but to Zolotov. Medvedev's fervor, however, was only sufficient to delegate this authority to his adjutant, a fellow SBP employee, Mikhail Mi-

Heev.

When Putin unceremoniously regained the throne in 2012, he looked at his guards.

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The security forces are being reorganized. "Vladimir Vladimirovich's idea was to appoint loyal people to all security agencies," a Novaya Gazeta source once described Putin's seemingly unexpected plan.612 Since 2013, the president has begun placing his bodyguards in positions previously off-limits. According to the same Novaya Gazeta source, Putin was seriously frightened by the mass protests of 2011–2012 and decided to fill the security agencies exclusively with trusted personnel. And who is more reliable than those to whom you've already entrusted your life? In fact, it was then that the country learned the names of the bodyguards—previously, only Zolotov, the leader of this brotherhood, had been visible, but now Alexey Dyumin, Dmitry Mironov, Yevgeny Zinichev, and all the rest were making headlines. Putin's desire to saturate the vertical of power with his own gatekeepers extended beyond the security agencies. For example, security guard Igor Babushkin, who once served in the Alpha group and protected Putin during his trips to the Caucasus, became deputy head of the Federal Agency for State Property Management, a position he was extremely fortunate to fulfill.

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The suspicious university quickly awarded a diploma in economics. A security guard was also appointed head of the presidential administration, that is, the manager. Finally, security guards began to be appointed governors and ministers.

— Alexey Dyumin — Governor of the Tula Region since 2016, then assistant to the president.

— Dmitry Mironov — Governor of the Yaroslavl region since 2016, then assistant
president.

— Evgeny Zinichev — in 2016, he served as acting governor of the Kaliningrad region and later headed the Ministry of Emergency Situations. He died after falling off a cliff, presumably while intoxicated.

intoxication.

— Sergey Morozov — acted as governor of the Astrakhan region in 2018–2019.

— Igor Babushkin — Governor of Astrakhan
skogo region since 2019.

— Sergei Melikov (former deputy to Zolotov, not for presidential security, but for the Russian National Guard, a retired special forces soldier) — head of the Republic of Dagestan since 2021.

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— Alexander Kurenkov — Minister of Emergency Situations since 2022.

How did the security guards cope with their new responsibilities as public politicians? One hilarious story will replace all the facts. Having just assumed the leadership of the Yaroslavl region, Mironov's "personal enforcer" showed up at an event where one of the authors of this book was present as a reporter. All was going well until the governor needed a photo opportunity. Of course, smiling isn't as important to Russian politicians as it is to their Western counterparts, but they still need to appear friendly. At that moment, Mironov's face clearly showed a struggle with himself—he tried to fake a smile, but it didn't work, and he ended up posing for a photo with a stony expression. While strolling with his guests, the governor tended to walk slightly behind them and kept glancing around—in short, he acted less like a boss than a security guard. His career became more and more indistinguishable from comedy with each passing day. A few years after his appointment to the Yaroslavl region, an acute

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the smart series "House Arrest", which carefully ridicules corrupt provincial officials613. The television people were especially convincing in portraying the dull governor, who

He tried to boost his popularity through social media, where he constantly posted staged photos from the gym. The film's governor was constantly accompanied by two oafish security guards with identical names—Vitaliks. As luck would have it, Mironov did much the same in real life—he regularly posted videos of his workouts on social media (he couldn't think of any other way to communicate with the public) and also acquired a security guard named Vitaly. Considering that part of the filming took place in Yaroslavl, the governor became seriously nervous: was he being ridiculed by the brash filmmakers? It seems all the coincidences were coincidental. Mironov was simply so awkward in the role of a politician that he literally begged to be cast in a comedy.

I wouldn't want you to think of the Mironovs, Zolotovs, and their colleagues as mere amusing idiots. In fact, Putin shared state secrets with these people, just as he did with Prigozhin.

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a monopoly on violence. In 2020, we investigated the activities of a little-known company, EKS, which repeatedly won multi-billion-dollar government contracts. Having barely begun work, the author of this investigation began receiving threats, and his email was subject to a phishing attack.614 Another colleague of ours, arriving in Yaroslavl, immediately discovered he was being followed.615 It turned out that EKS is connected to Mironov and his entourage from the same security fraternity. But we got off easy, because sometimes the president trusted his guards with far more dangerous deeds. According to the Wall Street Journal.616

Vadim Krasikov, an FSB special forces officer, was once associated with Putin's security detail. He was the man who killed the aforementioned Chechen militant named Khangoshvili in Germany in 2019. The Russian leader made no attempt to hide his sympathy for the killer. He made every effort to strike a deal with the German authorities and bring him back home, and then the whole world watched as Putin hugged the killer in front of television cameras at a government airport and quietly said, "Hello!" When we asked the former

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When asked Putin’s top subordinate whether Krasikov really knew Putin and his entourage, he responded: “They probably trained and shot together *(with Putin and the presidential guards – author’s note)”617.*

Speaking about the personnel successes of Zolotov and "his boys," as a former Kremlin employee calls the constellation of presidential guards,618 it's impossible not to note another important trend. Having promoted his "personal guards," the tsar, for some reason that is not entirely clear, punished their competitors. If you recall, we reported that the Security Service (SBP) under Viktor Zolotov had long been pitted against its parent agency, the Federal Protective Service (FSO), under Yevgeny Murov. This standoff came to an end during Putin's third term. Murov, whose position seemed unshakable, was fired in the spring of 2016. His man, Gennady Lopyrev, who built Putin's residences, was unexpectedly jailed for corruption at the same time—he became the highest-ranking Russian intelligence officer behind bars. In 2023, when Lopyrev was up for parole, he died suddenly.

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in prison for reasons no one could explain ("cold case"). Murov's longtime business partner, influential businessman Dmitry Mikhalchenko, also ended up behind bars—he was given an unprecedentedly long prison sentence for economic crimes (20 years). The catalyst for these reprisals remains unknown. One of Zolotov's acquaintances suggests that the guards convinced Putin of some kind of conspiracy that only they could counter.619 Perhaps so. But more likely, it was just another squabble over money and influence.

Putin's fears have cost the country dearly, both literally and figuratively. In 1997, when Putin was just beginning his career in the Kremlin, his driver may have killed a five-year-old

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A child was killed in an accident on the "government highway." This road connects the state dachas on Rublevskoye Highway with the Kremlin—a significant portion of the route runs via Kutuzovsky Prospekt. For years, the Federal Protective Service (FSO) has resisted the installation of a median barrier on this busy road—so that government motorcades (pictured) can continue to speed down the wrong side of the road. Fatal car accidents occur on this "road of death" every year, but the situation remains unchanged because it's safer for Putin. When he speeds down Kutuzovsky Prospekt, the adjacent roads are blocked by police—even ambulances can get stuck in long traffic jams. Hundreds of lower-ranking officials have acquired flashing lights so they can follow Putin in ignoring traffic rules with impunity.

Vladimir Voldema

Thanks to Putin's phobias, which have entrusted him to cooks and guards, the market for violence has noticeably transformed. Chekists, Prigozhin's men, security guards, and "Kadyrovites," who will be discussed in the next chapter, are not the full list of people with a license to kill. Almost every security agency is represented on this marketplace. GRU operatives, both retired and active, shamelessly work as militants for oligarchs—

For example, in June 2015, intelligence officers attacked a passerby on a Moscow street621. By coincidence, the attackers managed to

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They were held captive and even brought to trial (though, as expected, they were not punished). During the trial, it was revealed that the high-ranking GRU officers were working for Suleiman Kerimov, a billionaire close to the Kremlin, and that the victim of their attack was someone the businessman wanted to intimidate. Kerimov, incidentally, lives on Sparrow Hills in Moscow, in a mansion owned by the Federal Protective Service (FSO). This is the most prestigious residence in the capital—in Soviet times, general secretaries lived there, and the most favored foreign guests stayed there. For "a small surcharge for the guards," explains another member of this housing association ,622 "anything becomes possible." Kerimov's neighbors include his partner Magomed Gadzhiev, another oligarch close to the government, Roman Abramovich, Putin's chief of staff, Anton Vaino. Across the street, the president's friend Gennady Timchenko acquired a government property, and a little further away, Chechen businessman Ruslan Baysarov. Most of them, according to our source, pay some kind of tax to the Federal Protective Service. A full-fledged market.

violence and protection with their own supply and demand

marriage.

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However, Putin has another fear (albeit the most natural of all). Look at the photo from 2014. The president arrived at the Paralympic Games in Sochi. The official photo would be worth nothing if not for the man whose face we've circled.

Alexey Nikolsky/ Reuters

After a long investigation, we found out that this is a doctor named Alexey Shcheglov. He is a very difficult doctor. Shcheglov is constantly accompanied by
gives the head of state - at various events

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and on trips. If Shcheglov were an intensive care physician capable of providing emergency care, his presence at the president's side would be logical. However, he is an ENT specialist. We don't know if Putin has any ear, throat, or nose problems, but it's worth noting: the doctor is so important to the president that he not only keeps him close by, but even made his father a State Duma deputy as a reward for something.623 One might suspect the head of state of favoring Shcheglov specifically, but the issue has nothing to do with him, but with Putin's obsession with his health. We have discovered documents624 that prove that the Russian president is constantly accompanied by a huge staff of doctors of various specialties—otolaryngologists, dermatologists, intensive care specialists, traumatologists, and even an oncological surgeon. All of them are assigned to the government's Central Clinical Hospital, or CCH. When traveling outside Moscow, Putin always takes an average of five doctors with him, and occasionally even nurses. It's a bit of a boomerang: the "family" once chose Putin because he looked better than the decrepit Yeltsin, who spent too much time at the Central Clinical Hospital.

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The press then made fun of the old president, who had a semblance of a Kremlin office created in the hospital, removing the IVs and medical equipment, so that Yeltsin could receive visitors and record video messages there if necessary.625 And now, fake offices and teams of doctors have become just as much a part of Putin's life.

It would seem that if the ruler is obsessed with health, the country should have good healthcare. But healthcare under Putin hasn't seen a sharp rise—and that's not surprising. The elite, including Putin's court, are generally treated in different places than ordinary people. A new building for VIP patients has opened on the grounds of the Central Clinical Hospital under Putin—government communications have even been installed in the rooms there.626 There are also private clinics for courtiers and their bizarre needs. For example, at one of the St. Petersburg medical centers, which is associated with Putin's eldest daughter Maria and his friend Yuri Kovalchuk, escorts intended for the elite were examined for venereal diseases. Girls of various ages and sizes were listed in the clinic's documents according to a strange

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category "women's sports". Some of
"The female athletes" were also checked for virginity—apparently, there is such a request at the top.627 Of course, Putin is not young and lives

under stress; he has had injuries and illnesses, but the main reason for his obsession with health is still paranoia. A man who has dealt with his opponents in various ways, including vile poisonings, naturally fears for his life. It seems that Putin is more afraid of COVID than any other ruler in the world. Even when we wrote this chapter in 2024, Putin still forced his subordinates to sit at a distance from him during personal meetings, and those he saw in public were sent to a two-week quarantine in advance. Including those "masses" with whom the president likes to show off his meetings...

gift propaganda.

This chapter of the book is unique for its particularly high concentration of scoundrels and rogues. Yevgeny Prigozhin confirmed the depravity of Putin's court not only by his life but also by his death. In recent years, when the Tsar's favor...

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Having brought Prigozhin great profits and no less worries, the sadistic chef gradually began to go mad (if, of course, we consider his initial state normal). Either from impunity and a sense of self-importance, or from illness. We know that Prigozhin was at some point diagnosed with abdominal cancer and underwent treatment, including resection and a strict diet. In 2023, all this combined to play a cruel joke on Prigozhin: he decided he was capable of challenging the established order in the country. "He went nuts," as an acquaintance put it.628 Prigozhin raised his mercenary corps, which was then fighting in Ukraine and suffering particularly heavy losses, and launched an armed march on Moscow, destroying army aircraft and their crews along the way. The rebel verbally claimed that his anger was aimed not at Putin, but at the incompetent generals in his entourage, primarily Sergei Shoigu, then Russia's defense minister. This was likely true: Prigozhin had decided to use violent means to secure an even greater role at court. But whatever the motive, the result was unequivocal.

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The armed anti-government rebellion, the first in 30 years, was launched by someone who made a career exploiting Putin's fear of conspiracies and assassination attempts. Prigozhin's somersault caught the presidential guards and

all Russian intelligence agencies completely off guard. It turned out they weren't particularly capable of protecting the Kremlin. Units of Zolotov's National Guard may be effective in dispersing anti-Putin rallies, but they are powerless against well-armed and battle-hardened mercenaries. Dyumin, a long-time acquaintance of Prigozhin and, at the time of the mutiny, the governor of the Tula region, seemed to have disappeared (as you have seen more than once, this is a sure sign of cowardice and confusion. Putin, during the days of the mutiny, was also unknown - either he flew to St. Petersburg, or hid in his Valdai dacha under a lamp made of gold leaf629). Some

Some then assumed that the guard had gone into hiding, hoping to later redistribute the court benefits in his favor. Others said that Dyumin was secretly negotiating with Prigozhin to curb the armed excess. Be that as it may, the rebellion was stopped without

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Not by a single act, but by some secret agreements. Two days later, the mercenaries stopped advancing on Moscow and returned to their field camps. Everyone, including Putin and Prigozhin, pretended as if nothing had happened. No attempt was even made to detain the rebel leader and his senior officers as criminals—probably the biggest cold case in Putin's history. Two months later, the private jet carrying Prigozhin and his closest subordinates suddenly exploded high in the sky. The cook and his kitchen assistants were killed. There was no investigation either—a cold case within a larger cold case. A significant portion of society understood what happened correctly: Putin and his other courtiers took revenge on their former comrade the only way they know how: not by law, but through a quiet assassination.630 Some would say that this is perhaps Putin's only crime that does not deserve censure. After all, the scum that perished were scum whose hands were covered in blood up to the elbows. Yes, but strictly speaking, this is the most egregious extrajudicial execution committed by the Russian secret services: they demonstratively blew up a civilian plane in the sky, killing not

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not only rebels, but also innocent
crew - two pilots and a flight attendant.

Someday, when journalists can work freely in Russia, the circumstances of this execution will certainly become known. But even so, the main thing is clear: Prigozhin was killed by members of one of the death squads that operated under Putin under various names. Perhaps we will be equally surprised to learn that within the FSB there was a secret "aircraft bombing squad," just as we recently read about the "poet poisoning squad." Until that happens, the world watches with horror as cold cases occur in Russia. The press and ordinary people often see the hand of Putin's killers in almost every death of an important Russian.631 Frightened observers no longer distinguish whether a person died of cancer, died in a car accident, or choked on vomit during a prolonged drinking binge. Now, every notable death is considered a Putin cold case.

Nikolai Patrushev, the man who helped create this phenomenon, came to a bad end in his own way. He aged. And significantly worse than his peer and friend, Vladimir Putin. In May 2024, Putin removed Patrushev from his post.

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the post of Secretary of the Security Council, appointing him as his assistant for... shipbuilding. An acquaintance of Patrushev assesses this career move as "the beginning of retirement."632 Putin appointed as Patrushev's replacement on the Security Council that same Sergei Shoigu, a narcissistic braggart who previously served as Defense Minister and became the weak-willed culprit of the Prigozhin mutiny. "This is Putin's particularly clever personnel policy - to reshuffle idiots who have already screwed everything up," the former subordinate of the Russian president laughs loudly. The Security Council, he continues, is an overvalued body, "whose only importance is that at its meetings *(they are almost entirely held behind closed doors from the press - author's note)* Putin

"He can sometimes feel free to use foul language." Obscene words are not included in transcripts, but everything else does, even though these documents are kept classified. Therefore, Putin has long been making essential decisions that are important to keep secret even from posterity himself, individually consulting with various members of his inner circle, our interviewer is sure.

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Sednik. By leaving the Security Council, Patrushev showed the country what was truly important to him. He didn't want to give up the pompous office provided to him as Secretary of the Security Council. So Shoigu, at least initially, worked as the head of the Kremlin's most secret body, sitting in the office of the non-profit organization "Russian Geographical Society." Shoigu had created it earlier to indulge Putin's passion for nature trips, animals, birds, and mushrooms. To everyone's surprise, Putin appointed his economic adviser, Andrei Belousov, as the new Minister of Defense —a purely civilian man with autistic traits, who had previously rarely interacted even with his immediate subordinates, preferring numbers and papers. Some decided633 that this is how the president makes the army more effective, but others noted634 that a person like Belousov would definitely not start an armed rebellion.

Dyumin and Mironov are now also Putin's aides, but their powers seem far more real and significant than shipbuilding. Mironov is responsible for personnel selection—you've already seen it.

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how important this function is under Putin. Dyumin's sphere of responsibility is even broader—from domestic policy to the defense industry. In other words, the security guards, whatever may be said about their stupidity and failures, are the only heroes of this chapter who remain winners. They—

The pinnacle of the vicious pyramid that has developed in the country. Over the past 25 years, the number of people employed in the security sector in Russia has been steadily growing. For every 100,000 residents, we have 525 security guards. This is a huge army—almost 2.5 million people, often armed, no less than 3.5% of the total number of officially employed Russians. The foundation of this army is

mii are the security guards, so to speak, of the lower ranks, men in black and khaki, sitting at the entrances to the shopping centers, government institutions, and similar places. This is a profession familiar to Putin: his father worked as a factory security guard in the post-war period. "Even in retirement, he was still guarding something there," the president recalled with a kind smile.636

It’s not just that Russians feel insecure and are trying to protect themselves as best they can.

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be wary. There's also corruption, as always under Putin. In recent years, the authorities have introduced a series of laws requiring private and public establishments to hire security. Here are a few examples:

School shootings or, say, the terrorist attack on the Crocus City Hall concert hall in Moscow have shown that these security guards are, as a rule, useless. But this brings in income for the same rogues at the top of the pyramid. There are more than 17,000 (!) security companies in Russia, a huge number of which are owned and managed by retired, and even active, intelligence officers. And under the command of Russia's chief bodyguard, Viktor Zolotov, there is a structure with the complex name of FSUE "Okhrana"—these are the same guardsmen, paid from the budget, but legally, for a fee, they protect people and businesses (they can even guard crime bosses, so what?!).637

If we add to all the security guards already listed those who work unofficially—watchmen of summer cottage communities, garage cooperatives, entrances to apartment buildings, and so on—then we get a completely paradoxical picture. Russians

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Every day they become more and more maniacally protective of one another, protecting their homes from RDX in the basements and killers in the attics, saving their property from criminal attacks, and all this while Putin, hiding in one of his secret hideouts, insists that life has become safer under his rule. Perhaps he is just as afraid,

like everyone else.

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6. Putin's foot soldiers

How the Kremlin Made Cruelty and Fear Profitable

Yes, everything you've already read doesn't resemble "kindness and courage," the two virtues we've distilled into the title of this section. But Putin would be a minor hypocrite if he didn't cover up the cruelty and fear that have settled in Russia with some pretty words. One of the fundamental ideas that has become part of Putin's state rhetoric is that the president saved Russians from the terrible, "dashing" 1990s. It's a Kremlin cliché.

began to be widely used in speeches simultaneously with Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. Its meaning is primarily non-economic. Yes, in the 2000s, due to rising global energy prices, Russians became noticeably richer and more confident about the future. But the phrase "the wild 90s" appealed more to a sense of physical security. Putin told Russians something like this: in the 90s, people were killed, robbed, anyone could do anything lawless to anyone, but I brought order, now you shouldn't have *to*

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scary. (A statistical study638, of course, will show that this is not true even purely arithmetically - the total number of crimes, including many serious ones, was higher in the 2000s than in the 90s.) This cliché has become so deeply ingrained in the consciousness of Russians that in 2018, a very young singer, Monetochka, released a popular track with the lyrics “in the 90s, people were killed and everyone was running around completely naked.” The cliché, invented in the Kremlin, looked

another peak of hypocrisy, conquered by Putin. In the 90s, people were killed by his friends from the St. Petersburg gangs, in the 2000s they
They continued to do the same thing, only now they were joined by assassins from the secret services. They robbed people just as much as in the 1990s, and finally, the authorities continued to turn important investigations into cold cases. All these facts didn't stop many people from trusting Putin.

A significant part of the myth about the “quiet 2000s” "x" was based on Chechen material. In the "dashing 90s" there was a bloody and unsuccessful war in the Caucasus, where thousands of young Russian men died without achieving victory. In the 2000s, there was a relative

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The Chechen campaign was remarkably swift and successful, unlike the previous one. Chechnya was not only subdued, it seemed to have become a prosperous region, where order was maintained by its own strong leader, full of reverence for the Russian tsar. This is a significant, if not the most important, part of the myth. People were told: the bodies of fallen soldiers would no longer be brought back from Chechnya, terrorists would stop kidnapping people and cutting off their heads, there was no need to fear the Chechens anymore. It worked. Therefore, it would not be a stretch to say that the "Chechen question" played a huge, perhaps even key, role in Putin's popularity among Russians. And Putin, in his own way, reciprocated Chechnya: it has always been an important part of his daily affairs. Andrei Illarionov, whom we quoted extensively above, recalled how, in early 2000, he applied for a job as Putin's economic adviser. The head of state summoned him to his residence for an interview, and in the midst of the conversation, the presidential orderly entered the office with a note for Putin. After reading it, he told Illarionov: "We've taken Shatoi! Our guys crushed them." This is a district center in Chechnya, located in the mountainous region.

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republics. Until then, Shatoi had been the last major settlement controlled by separatists. Its capture meant the defeat of the resistance. Putin radiated joy. A debate ensued between the two men about the correctness of the Kremlin's Chechen policy, but that's not what's important now: the Russian president personally oversaw the battles for every Chechen regional center, and he will continue to closely oversee the puppet regime he established in Chechnya. A senior official who worked with the president once tried to dissuade the authors of this book from believing that the Chechen issue played a significant role in

Putin's rise to power. "Pension payments, social benefits, tax cuts—these boosted Putin's approval ratings *(in 1999–2000—author's note)* many times more than the operation in Chechnya,"

said the interlocutor.640 But that's not true. The archives of the VTsIOM sociological service show Putin's monthly rating in 1999 :641 Until August, he wasn't even included in polls, his popularity was close to zero; after becoming prime minister in August and launching an operation against militants in Dagestan, he immediately received 31% approval; in September—

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The apartment building bombings and the start of the offensive in Chechnya were already at 51%; in October, the army was enjoying success—65%; in December, when the military approached Shatoi —80%. Putin would show even higher ratings in the following years, but neither he nor any other Russian politician known to us has achieved such a pace since then. So Chechnya is, without a doubt, Putin's needle in the egg. In fact, the entire history of modern Chechnya—

This is a series of bloody, but very fortunate for Putin and somewhat suspicious coincidences. As promised, we won't suspect until we can prove it. So, we'll simply present the facts.

— President Yeltsin summoned the head of the FSB, Putin, to officially inform him of his upcoming appointment as prime minister. This conversation took place on August 5, 1999 (Yeltsin himself mentioned the date in his memoirs.642 Naturally, this decision was not news to Putin that day, since he had previously discussed the plan with at least Boris Berezovsky). Putin accepted the offer. Two days later, on August 7, several hundred Chechen fighters

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Under the cover of night, a group of Chechen militants led by terrorist Shamil Basayev entered Dagestan, a republic neighboring Chechnya that was relatively calm and loyal to Moscow. Today, both Chechnya and Dagestan are ordinary constituent entities of Russia, but at that time, things were not quite so. During an armed conflict with the Russian army from 1994 to 1996, Chechen separatists achieved a special, albeit unclear, status for their republic. According to the Khasavyurt Peace Agreement, which ended the First Chechen War, Ichkeria (as the republic called itself under the separatists) legally remained part of the Russian Federation, but Moscow exercised almost no control over this federal subject, and a decision on the region's final status was postponed until the end of 2001. At that time, Chechnya was engulfed in internal conflict: radical field commanders were fighting moderates. Criminal activities flourished—kidnapping, extortion, oil theft, and the like. Dagestan also had its Islamists, its own corrupt authorities, and its own criminality, but the republic remained an unconditional part of Russia. Both law and lawlessness

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The ones here differed little from those in Moscow or Kemerovo. Therefore, when the Chechen Islamist Basayev led his armed forces into Dagestan, many in the country perceived this as *external aggression against Russia.* Any leader who could adequately respond to the aggressor would immediately gain the people's love. And here's a coincidence: Russia had just acquired a new leader. Having received a job offer on August 5, Putin was officially appointed acting prime minister on August 9. That same day, Yeltsin, publicly introducing Putin, named him his successor for the first time, thereby informing the country's citizens that they had a new leader before them. Putin immediately took action—troops were deployed to Dagestan, which, although not without setbacks, were able to push the bulk of the militants back to Chechnya by mid-September. As we recall, this coincidence brought Putin something like 31% of the approval rating, the first rating in his

life.

— From September 4 to 16, 1999, a series of events took place of four explosions in residential buildings in different cities of Russia. The population is erupting in hatred

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toward the terrorists hiding in Chechnya. And on September 20, Russian aircraft began bombing the republic, followed by ground forces. Success accompanied the Russian army, although often achieved through indiscriminate fire, killing civilians. The success of the Russian army then meant success for Putin. The September coincidence brought him over 20% of his approval rating.

— That same autumn of 1999. The Kremlin chose Akhmat Kadyrov as its main ally in the Chechen war. Kadyrov had previously been the mufti of Ichkeria—that is, the spiritual leader of the separatists. He had a conflict with Basayev and other radical field commanders, which Moscow took advantage of. Kadyrov's candidacy as the Kremlin's internal ally in Chechnya arose thanks to Ruslan Atlangeriev. He invited Moscow emissaries to meet with the mufti in the autumn of 1999 and even provided a secure location for it. The first meeting of the FSB leadership

with Kadyrov took place in Makhachkala (Dagestan) in Atlangeriev’s apartment, then the mufti was taken to Moscow for secret negotiations with Putin. In the capital

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The Chechen candidate was again housed in Atlangeriev's apartment on Tverskaya Street, from where he was taken to the prime minister. The two took a liking to each other—Putin presented the mufti with a prayer rug and promised power over Chechnya if Kadyrov defected to Moscow. However, apparently there were secret conditions. A source familiar with the circumstances of those negotiations told the authors of this book643 that the FSB, bargaining with various

Chechen field commanders, did not hold back in her promises: those who agreed to go over to Moscow's side were promised the opportunity to freely engage in racketeering in a large city like Novorossiysk, five million dollars in cash, and expensive real estate. Which of these things exactly won over Akhmat Ka-

We don't know who Kadyrov was, but he accepted the Kremlin's offer. So

who is Ruslan Atlangeriev, the man who essentially brought Kadyrov to power in Chechnya? He's a gangster with ties to the FSB. Atlangeriev was at the time one of the leaders of the Lazan criminal group, which we mentioned above. This gang, which consisted mainly of Chechens,

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There are two things to know. First, it was exceptionally brutal: murders, kidnappings, robberies, extortion, and so on. Second, the "Lazans" collaborated with the FSB. Besides Atlangeriev, another leader of the group, Maxim Lazovsky, worked with the "office." There is evidence that the latter was an agent of the very same URPO, a secret death squad within the FSB. Two former high-ranking security officials in conversation with us did not deny this fact, but flatly refused to provide any details about their work with the "Lazans." Their attitude is understandable: if the FSB openly admits its ties to gangsters, it follows that the "office" was covering for murderers and robbers. It turns out that the pro-Russian

leader of Chechnya was chosen not by the people, but by the FSB, criminals associated with the "office," and Putin. Perhaps this, too, could be called a coincidence. As a result of this “accident,” members of the Kadyrov clan became the rightful rulers of Chechnya for many years.

— In 2004, Akhmat Kadyrov had difficulties communicating with the Kremlin. Most likely, it was a financial matter—the Chechens were trying to

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The proceeds from the sale of oil produced in the region were to be transferred to the republican budget, but Moscow refused to fulfill this request. And then another tragic coincidence! In May 2004, shortly after returning from Moscow, Akhmat Kadyrov was killed in a terrorist attack. The investigation, without much investigation, blamed Chechen separatists, including Basayev. It all happened on May 9 at the Dynamo stadium in Grozny, where Kadyrov was reviewing a parade of Chechen security forces. A bomb exploded under the stands where the Chechen leader was sitting. There were many strange things about that terrorist attack. The explosion was precisely targeted, as if its perpetrators knew in advance not only Kadyrov's schedule but also the exact spot, down to the centimeter, where the Chechen president would be sitting. By another coincidence, Akhmat Kadyrov's son, Ramzan, who was supposedly the head of his father's security detail, was not with him at the time. Ramzan had a better relationship with Moscow than his father at the time: he was helping the FSB crack down on separatists and was generally well-regarded. He was also in Moscow at the time of his father's murder. Soon after, Ramzan

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took Akhmat's place. From 2004 to the present day, Ramzan Kadyrov has ruled Chechnya (first as prime minister, and since 2007, as president). Yes, there was another coincidence. As soon as Kadyrov Sr. died, his eldest son, Zelimkhan, also passed away. In theory, he could have claimed power in Chechnya by right of seniority, but the problem was that Zelimkhan was known as a drug addict and a troublemaker. Having such an older brother created major image problems for Ramzan, and—coincidentally!—he died mysteriously three weeks after his father's death. This fact was attributed to health problems, although in fact it was another

"hanging".

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Ramzan Kadyrov and Vladimir Putin at a meeting in the Kremlin on the evening of May 9, just hours after the death of the elder Kadyrov. According to a Kremlin source, Putin promised to transfer power in the republic to Ramzan.

kremlin.ru

— Ramzan Kadyrov, like Vladimir Putin, had plenty of public critics up to a certain point (later people realized that this was mortally dangerous and would stop sticking their necks out). For example, in 2004, the famous American journalist of Russian origin, Paul Klebnikov, began writing a book about the embezzlement of budget funds.

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money in Chechnya. This issue directly threatened Kadyrov's interests. And Khlebnikov was shot in Moscow. People from Kadyrov's circle and the "Lazanskie" were reasonably suspected of the crime.
Bandits. But they all escaped punishment, and the mastermind behind the hit was once again named as an unidentified individual with ties to the separatists (a new cold case). In other words, the authorities wanted to claim that the death of Kadyrov's critic was a simple coincidence. Yet another one.

— 2006. In Moscow, the renowned journalist Anna Politkovskaya was killed by assassins, again linked to the Lazan gang. The case remained a cold case; the Russian authorities tried to pin the murder on Boris Berezovsky, despite not a shred of evidence (they could just as easily have linked the crime to Yuri Shutov or Vladimir Kumarin). The fact that Politkovskaya's entire career had been tied to Chechnya, whose leadership she mercilessly criticized, was again dismissed by investigators as a coincidence. The fact that Politkovskaya was killed on October 7, Vladimir Putin's birthday, was also considered a coincidence.
Ramzan's acquaintances

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Kadyrov was once explained to one of the authors of this book that he was very fond of showing off - in his own understanding of the word645. He could very well

"Kill a man as a gift" to Putin, says one of the sources. Another recalled a somewhat similar example: in the early 2000s, one of Ramzan's lovers was killed in Chechnya, likely at the hands of Kadyrov's subordinates—she had been annoying the Chechen leader in some way. Ramzan didn't grieve, but he named a gas station in Grozny after the murdered woman. "It's his twisted sense of humor," the source said. However, despite all the indications of Kadyrov's involvement in Politkovskaya's murder, his role in the journalist's death hasn't even been investigated. It's just a coincidence.

— 2015. Another influential critic of Kadyrov and Putin, former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov, was murdered. At the time, he was one of the leaders of the Russian opposition and a likely rival to Putin in the 2018 presidential election. He was shot dead on the Moskvoretsky Bridge, just a few hundred meters from the Kremlin.

This looks like another creepy "gift" to the Russian president. This time, they didn't even bring anyone into the case.

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"The Lazanskys," it was all done by Chechen security forces, literally Kadyrov's subordinates. The perpetrators were caught, but their commanders, much less Kadyrov himself, weren't bothered by the investigation. The motive for the murder was given as some "anti-Muslim" statements by Nemtsov and even less explainable "selfish motives"...646 The fact that Kadyrov had previously personally threatened Nemtsov with death was already considered

account coincidence.

The list of suspicious events that made Chechnya what it is today could go on. It's likely that some of them, after a full investigation, will indeed be proven to be mere coincidence. And some will not. But for now, it's important to note: Putin is personally responsible for concealing the truth about all the events described. Only he could have ordered law enforcement agencies not to investigate the Kadyrov family's involvement in the crimes. Only he reaped a direct political benefit from these murders and terrorist attacks.

And what did Russia get under the guise of a peaceful Chechnya? A territory where, de facto, foreign powers do not operate.

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Laws operating in other regions. In 1999, Chechnya, which didn't live by the same rules as Moscow or Kemerovo, invaded Russia, and in 2024, everything remained the same. This is a paradoxical outcome of Putin's rule. For the Russian president himself, Chechnya has become a kind of trap. He cannot tell the truth about Kadyrov's crimes because it would break the needle of his own power. And as a result, we see further spirals of cruelty and fear, new murders, robberies, embezzlement, and other lawlessness.

Thanks to Putin's patronage, Ramzan Kadyrov has become perhaps the most notorious peddler of cruelty and fear. Russian regional leaders are legally forbidden from maintaining their own armed forces, and no one has particularly sought to do so in recent years. Regional units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Federal Security Service, and other security agencies, although linked to the governors, report to their superiors in Moscow. Almost from the first day the Kadyrov family came to power, things changed in Chechnya. Initially, the Kremlin attempted to create some "checks and balances" in the republic, for example,

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He sent administrators and security officials unconnected with the Kadyrovs to Grozny. But these attempts were quickly and brutally put an end to. One visiting prime minister of Chechnya was simply fired, a second was poisoned (not fatally, but quite seriously) and then also fired, and a third was blown up by a mine, rammed by a truck, and ultimately fired again, without waiting for his recovery. We won't even mention the names of these people because they are irrelevant—Kadyrov received an absolute mandate from Putin to rule his region, and other than him, there are no real leaders there for a long time. The plan to appoint someone unrelated to the Kadyrovs or connected to their crimes as prime minister failed, and now all executive power in the region (we won't even mention the legislative and judicial branches) belongs to members of Ramzan Kadyrov's family and closest friends. The situation with the security forces was roughly the same, albeit with even greater brutality. One senior FSB officer, who oversaw the security agencies in Chechnya, burned alive under suspicious circumstances. Another was demonstratively shot by Kadyrov's security detail.

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Leninsky Prospekt in Moscow. Two high-ranking officers of the Russian army were killed in quick succession—one in Moscow, the other in Dubai. Both were again targeted by Lazan bandits, assisted by people from Kadyrov's inner circle. All of these cases were cold cases; none of the actual organizers of these extrajudicial executions were punished. At least two of our sources in Russian law enforcement admitted that after all of these episodes, they hated Kadyrov and would be glad to receive an order to arrest or eliminate him. But no such order has ever been issued, and it remains the same: Kadyrov's Chechnya is the foundation of Putin's power. Kadyrov has effectively replaced federal law enforcement agencies with his own guard—the number of armed officers from various security agencies (primarily the Russian National Guard) in Chechnya ranges from several tens of thousands. Once, in a fit of flattery for the Russian Tsar, Kadyrov called himself “Putin’s foot soldier.”648 In August 2024, at the height of the war in Ukraine, Putin, having arrived in Chechnya, will say to this: “We are all foot soldiers. We are all in this

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"In a sense, in the same position."649 In what "sense"? What kind of "position" is this? Putin probably just said something meaningless, to return the flattery with a smile. But it turned out to be a striking metaphor: the relationship between Putin and Kadyrov is a surprising symbiosis, where the power and life of each depend entirely on the other. There is no unbridled power for Kadyrov without a mandate from Putin, and no reign for Putin without a submissive Chechnya.

Political assassinations not only failed to punish the Chechen ruler, but also enriched him. Corruption in Chechnya is as indescribable as the cruelty. Kadyrov is the only governor in Russia who unabashedly displays his luxurious and immoral lifestyle. He owns a number of houses (including abroad), apartments, cars, and other attributes of wealth that are disproportionate to his official salary. We mentioned above that Russian propaganda always stigmatizes officials who have fallen into disgrace, flaunting something gold: pens, toilets, or other equally glittering objects. Kadyrov is an exception to this rule.

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of this rule. He demonstratively flaunts the abundance of gold around him: here's a golden Kalashnikov assault rifle, here's the golden pistol used to kill one of his rivals, here are the gold bars obtained by Kadyrov's henchmen at the bank. And they don't do anything to him for it.

Ramzan Kadyrov poses with a gold-plated Kalashnikov machine gun—the photo shows just a small part of his personal weapons collection.

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Kadyrov is so skilled at intimidating everyone around, that he has almost openly begun to provide paid services for the forceful resolution of problems. His people—those same thousands of security officials—for a fee or a share in a business can help seize an enterprise by force, punish a competitor, or do anything else that is certainly described in the Criminal Code. And finally, to complete the terrifying portrait of the man Putin put in charge of Chechnya: Kadyrov is an open polygamist, who cohabitates without shame.

with underage girls.

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Vladimir Putin poses for a photo with the male members of Kadyrov's family. In fact, several of the children pictured here were born not to his legal wife, Medni, but to concubines. Some of the concubines had affairs with the Chechen ruler and bore him heirs before reaching adulthood. This photo includes the children of at least four of Kadyrov's wives.

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These facts can no longer be called a “suspicious coincidence,” because the murders of competitors, theft, sex with minors and many other crimes of Kadyrov were repeatedly

Proven by journalistic investigations, corroborated by material evidence and witness testimony. With his defiant behavior, Kadyrov seems to be demonstrating to everyone around him that he has achieved a special status through the cruelty and fear he instills in those around him. And indeed, that is indeed the case.

The heroes of this chapter have mostly met or will meet bad ends. Ruslan Atlangeriev was kidnapped and killed by Kadyrov's men (also a cold case)—a common story for those who aid the rise of tyrants and then turn out to be dangerous witnesses to that rise. The remaining Lazan leaders were also either killed or disappeared (all cold cases). The group's rank-and-file fighters are now doing dirty work in the interests of Ramzan Kadyrov. Terrorist Shamil Basayev, who carried out bloody acts of sabotage throughout the final chapters of our narrative, was liquidated by the KGB in the summer of 2006. This is one of the few...

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measures in modern history, when the FSB committed an act of violence that was worth committing. The press and ordinary people still circulate versions that Basayev or someone from his entourage was in contact with the "office" and from time to time carried out secret missions beneficial to the Kremlin.650 According to one of these versions, the militants' invasion of Dagestan, simultaneously with Vladimir Putin's nomination as successor, was also inspired by the secret services in order to boost the new leader's ratings. This version cannot be verified after the death of Basayev and most of the Chechen leaders.

The separatists are unlikely to succeed.

The future of Chechnya is a huge challenge for the country. Kadyrov, barring his health, will likely rule the republic for at least as long as Putin rules Russia. As soon as something happens to one of these two, Chechnya will become unstable, and the region will once again become a pressing issue for the entire country.

This chapter also featured real heroes: Paul Klebnikov and Anna Politkovskaya. Earlier, we remembered other journalists who lost their

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lives in an attempt to paint a true, not fictitious, portrait of Vladimir Putin and his court. Yuri Shchekochikhin, Mark Grigoriev, Nikolai Andrushchenko, Anatoly Levin-Utkin, Magomed Yevloyev, and many other reporters became victims of murderers who were never punished. Many others—

Like the aforementioned Ruslan Linkov, they lost their health as a result of the attacks. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Russian journalists who tried to tell the truth lost their jobs, and even their homes, as happened to the authors of this book. But there were other journalists too—those who helped Putin create his image, born of hypocrisy. In short, the most important war of the Putin era —the war for truth—had its victims, heroes, and villains.

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Part Five (The Most Personal)

Truth

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1. Putin's killers

How Russian journalists got rid of one master to find many at once

2004 was a very tense year for Russian journalists, with numerous events, some tragic. We've already covered some of them above. Among other things, the Yukos affair was unfolding.

Two of the company's shareholders were under arrest, while the rest fled abroad, attempting to salvage at least part of their fortune. Roman Badanin, one of the authors of this book, was then working as the politics editor at Gazeta.Ru, Russia's leading online media outlet. To a certain extent, it was a blessed time for Russian journalism: the state had not yet interfered in our work, new horizons were visible ahead—the internet was rapidly taking over Russia, and Gazeta.Ru was gaining more and more readers every day. But there was a problem. Our publication was then financially dependent on Yukos and was even located in one of its offices. Before the attack on the oil company, this fact had no impact on our work.

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investors, as far as I could judge, did not interfere with our work, on the contrary, financing was possible
allowed us to expand our staff and introduce innovations that other editorial offices hadn't even dreamed of. But the clash between Yukos and the Kremlin changed something. In addition to the uncertainty about the future, a previously unknown difficulty was revealed: businessmen viewed us as a weapon in their struggle with the authorities. One day, a Yukos representative contacted me to discuss a sensitive matter. The political department had a high-ranking source in the justice system, which was well known in the editorial office. The owners invited me to meet with the source and address him privately: would he be willing to hand over one of the confidential documents concerning Yukos to the company's managers for a fee? I, Roman Ba-

Danin, I've never admitted to this episode before and I do so now with shame. Fortunately, the meeting with the source ended in nothing (at least, this bribery didn't happen through me). At that time, in the hustle and bustle of criminal cases, the owners' request seemed quite natural to me. It was obvious to everyone that the attack on Yukos was politically motivated.

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The situation was of a purely political nature: investigators worked day after day in our building on Zagorodnoye Highway in Moscow, and confiscated oil company servers were carried past my office. There was a sense that the bad guys had to be stopped as quickly as possible, by any means necessary. Over time, our opinion on the nature of the attack on Yukos remained unchanged—Putin was using illegal means to deal with businessmen who were impeding his political hegemony. But the shame over the bribery episode only grew stronger over the years.

What is this chapter about? It's about how journalists and the media business have also contributed significantly to Putin's triumph, to the victory of his hypocrisy.

It's clear that there was no free press in the Soviet Union; all existing media were, in one way or another, state-owned and controlled by the Party and the KGB. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the situation had every chance of improving: numerous new media outlets emerged in the country, and formerly state-owned newspapers and television companies came under the control of labor collectives, which...

newly trained in reporting and management

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skills. It can't be said that Russian journalists succeeded. From personal communications and publications, we know of examples of how in the 1990s the new Russian authorities, while ostensibly democratic, forced journalists into submission, punished recalcitrant reporters, and dictated the rules of the game to entire editorial offices. However, this was only part of the problem. The media representatives themselves, lacking experience, failed to establish clear work rules and turned a blind eye to commissioned, politically charged, low-quality articles and television reports. Money then infiltrated the media in the most unpleasant way. Journalists were not shy about flying on airplanes provided for their business.

given to them by oligarchs or officials, accepting apartments from them as gifts, including abroad, not to mention smaller gifts. For the generous fees paid by the new owners, almost anything could be published. We both worked in the media early in our careers, where, occasionally, commissioned materials were published. We're talking about this.

If they knew, they participated.

Who were the new owners of newspapers and television channels? A previously absent social-

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The leading class are businessmen, large ones at the federal level and smaller ones at the regional and city levels. Many of them quickly realized the importance of media in the new life and became owners or shareholders of media outlets. Here is a very incomplete list as of the late 90s—the first half.

guilt of the 2000s.

— The businessman **Boris Berezovsky,** mentioned many times, together with his one-time partner and later enemy **Roman Abramovich** — Russian Public Television (later Channel One), at that time the most popular Russian-

Russian Broadcasting Company.

— **Berezovsky** owned Kommersant, the largest business newspaper of the period, and numerous associated print and online publications. He also owned Nezavisimaya Gazeta.

— Also mentioned many times is **Vladimir Gusinsky** — the NTV channel, the Echo of Moscow radio station, the Segodnya newspaper, the Itogi magazine, and a number of entertainment and information online media outlets.

— Billionaire and former government member **Vladimir Potanin** — publications, at various times

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which were part of the Profmedia company (Komsomolskaya Pravda, Izvestia, Afisha and others).

— **YUKOS shareholders** (Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Leonid Nevzlin and others) — Gazeta.Ru, Moskovskiye Novosti.

— Billionaire metallurgist **Vladimir Lisin** — "Gazeta".

— Bankers **Dmitry and Alexey Ananyev** — “Arguments and Facts,” once the world’s highest-circulation newspaper (almost 33.5 million copies in the early 90s).

Officials and businessmen associated with them were also involved. For example, Moscow City Hall secretly controlled the capital's largest newspaper by circulation, Moskovsky Komsomolets, and the city's television networks. Even Viktor Cherkesov, a current civil servant and FSB officer, had his own media outlet—the Rosbalt news agency, founded in 2001 in St. Petersburg.

For many years, the media was run by the wife of Putin's colleague, Natalya Chaplina. At the regional level, the caliber of media owners was smaller, and the real

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ness is more vicious. In large and prosperous regions - Yekaterinburg, Samara, St. Petersburg - each
Even a large company considered it its duty to support the media outlets it controlled.

It's safe to assume that in most cases, shareholders among the country's wealthiest people didn't cause any harm to the editorial staff, or at least didn't interfere with their work until a certain point. But a certain point always came. When fighting with other oligarchs or the state, media owners inevitably resorted to the services of their media outlets. Each time, it looked different, but in essence, it often resembled the same story of bribery of a source.

Perhaps this could have been called growing pains—a few more years, and journalists and media owners would likely have come to accept the rules of coexistence accepted in the democratic world. But those few years didn't happen. At the turn of the century, Vladimir Putin, who had his own experience working with journalists and his own perverse desires in this area, took over Russia.

Working with Sobchak, Putin saw what, for example, TV killer Alexander Nevzorov was capable of,

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Recruited by political crook Yuri Shutov, Nevzorov later found himself in the hands of other shady businessmen—for example, he produced television reports on behalf of criminals Ilya Traber and Vladimir Kumarin. There wasn't much truth in these reports, but

They were nevertheless popular with ordinary viewers. Putin knew Nevzorov quite well.651 It

was the future president who issued a pass for the TV killer when he ran to the city government in 1990 at the call of Shutov and Sobchak. Putin, according to the recollections of Nevzorov's colleagues, somehow helped him in the mid-90s, when an attack was being prepared on the journalist (according to this version, Putin dissuaded Nevzorov's enemies from rash actions. Much later, Nevzorov would hint in an interview that he was greatly indebted to Putin for something done at that time.652). Putin could also have known about Nevzorov because the reporter had probably been collaborating with the KGB since the 80s, and later with the FSB (in interviews, Nevzorov did not deny that he was following the orders of the "office", and often bragged about his

commands among high-ranking Chekists

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(stov653). The recruitment of the future TV killer could have happened under unsightly circumstances. In the first half of the 80s, young Nevzorov decided to pursue a career in the church - he

He studied to become a priest and sang in the church choir at the Leningrad Theological Academy. The rector of this academy at the time was the future Patriarch Kirill, aka "Mikhailov." The academy's curator was Putin's friend Alexander Grigoriev, a KGB officer hiding under a cassock. And so, at the educational institution run by these curious characters, a scandal erupted. A criminal case was opened against the choir's choirmaster, Father Jonathan—secular name Anatoly Yeletskikh—under charges of "sodomy" (the punishment for homosexuals in the USSR) and "corruption of minors" (referring to young parish altar boys). The case went to court—it was heard in the Petrogradsky district of Leningrad, recall two people familiar with the story. Among others, the case materials mentioned the singer Alexander Glebovich Nevzorov. (Nevzorov himself would later say in an interview654 that he had once “seen” a blowjob in the church altar, judging by the context-

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(The case involved, presumably, one or two clergymen of the Russian Orthodox Church. Nevzorov did not disclose the details of the incident.) Ultimately, the case was closed, Ionafan was temporarily suspended from his post, and later he became the chief representative of the Russian Orthodox Church in the now-independent Ukraine. His career in that country ended with his arrest for working for the Russian authorities and a subsequent exchange for a large group of Ukrainian prisoners of war. According to someone who knew Nevzorov at that distant time, all the participants in the criminal case, including Ionafan, agreed to work for the KGB, which is how the case was hushed up. It wouldn't be long before young Nevzorov, through the influence of his mother, a well-known local journalist, was hired by Leningrad television. At the time, the program "600 Seconds" was being launched there—its concept was conceived by the renowned television director Dmitry Rozhdestvensky. The idea was to popularize the work of the police and the State Security Committee: people in uniform leaked criminal stories to reporters, who then told these stories in 10 minutes, briskly and without Soviet equivocations.

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on air. Very soon, Nevzorov became the host of "600 Seconds."

We can't know what Putin thinks of Nevzorov, but he observed this man's example up close, forming his impression of journalists. It was a depressing example. Thanks to Nevzorov, Russian journalism has firmly established

The term "chernukha" (black stuff)—compromising information that doesn't necessarily have to be true—became commonplace. Nevzorov could literally blackmail St. Petersburg politicians and businessmen: if they didn't want a "black" story about them shown on a popular TV program, they had to purchase a "subscription," meaning pay money (and, as a rule, more than once). There were those who refused, and Nevzorov "killed" them. For example, in 1989, Leningrad Cola distributors dared to refuse a TV hitman, and he showed footage of a mouse allegedly found in a soda bottle. Apparently, Nevzorov himself had previously placed the animal in the Coke—he had a certain fixation on rodents: you might remember how he and Yuri Shutov killed dyed lab rats.

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In the 1990s, Nevzorov's film crew often included a bodyguard (pictured sitting by the rear wheel of the minibus) in case of conflicts with the subjects of his reports. The journalist himself later admitted that Yuri Shutov provided the film crew with transportation.655

At some point, Nevzorov—or, as he was known in the city, Nevrozov—became feared by all the politicians of St. Petersburg. Here's another example of what he was capable of. In 1991, the head of the Leningrad City Council's Culture Committee, the renowned archaeologist Gleb Lebedev, began to harass Mayor Sobchak. At the behest of the mayor's office, Nevzorov staged a revolt against Lebe

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The girl, in essence, was a KGB provocation. Lebedev emerged from the dentist's office after a major operation (he had four teeth removed), his face immobilized by a strong anesthetic, his lips did not move, his tongue did not move. Lebedev probably also drank afterward. Nevzorov's film crew reported the drunk man on the street to the police and, as if by chance, were the first to show up with a television camera at the police station where the deputy was taken.656 Lebedev was branded a drunk, the mayor's office could have been pleased, and Nevzorov—

Count on praise from those who commissioned the latest "dirt." Over time, the city government, to be on the safe side, also acquired a "season ticket" from Nevzorov—the mayor's office gave him land plots and ceded near-monopoly rights to metro advertising, thereby ensuring the TV hitman a comfortable life. In 1993, Nevzorov was elected to the State Duma for the first time. He ran for the Duma four times in total (!),

each time in single-mandate constituencies (in different ones, actually), and always received the majority of votes. In other words, people believed him, no matter what nonsense he spouted on screen.

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There was only one misfire: in 1999, Nevzorov lost the election to the Democratic Party candidate Yuli Rybakov, the same artist whom the young Putin had imprisoned for sedition. Nevzorov, however, quickly recovered and ran for reelection in the by-election.

another district, where he again encountered no competition. Nevzorov made a point of not attending parliamentary sessions and did not introduce a single law, which
didn't stop people from voting for him again, and colleagues from accepting him as an equal. All of this could be attributed to Nevzorov's unique political position, but no one could ever understand what that position actually consisted of. At various times, he was for the Orthodox Church and against it, for Putin (he even served as his confidant in the 2012 elections) and against Putin, for the monarchy and for democracy simultaneously, for some bandits against others, and then for the latter against the former. It would be much more accurate to say that Nevzorov's political career is also purely a business. Two acquaintances of the TV killer recall that, after becoming a deputy, he sold the IDs of his

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Molotnikov—this status confers certain privileges in a country like today's Russia. Nevzorov's deputy assistant credentials were purchased, for example, by his longtime friend and sponsor, Vladimir Kumarin, aka Kum, an important character in the previous chapters. Nevzorov is almost as ideal an opportunist as the already described Governor

Tkachev, only far more gifted. Nevzorov speaks beautifully, is intelligent, apt in his comparisons and imagery, and is convincing to people of any level of education. It was through this charming rogue that Putin first met journalists. And then, there's more.

"There's an artificial joint lying right here in front of me. An artificial joint. It consists of two elements that imitate a real one. During the operation, they are connected, inserted into each other,"

This is a quote from a program broadcast at the end of October 1999 by Sergei Dorenko657, another television killer658. The program was dedicated to Yevgeny Primakov, a politician no longer young, who that year led the anti-Yeltsin and anti-Putin forces in

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parliamentary elections. Primakov, as well as former Prosecutor General Yuri Skuratov and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, were then the main enemies of the "family," which had plotted a non-competitive transfer of power to Vladimir Putin. These three had to be destroyed by almost any means necessary. We have already described what was done to Skuratov and how, and Primakov and Luzhkov were personally destroyed by Dorenko. From September to December 1999, just over a dozen hour-long episodes of his television program were aired, during which time the rating of Primakov and Luzhkov's "Fatherland - All Russia" party fell by approximately half (in the vote on December 19, this electoral bloc received 13.3%, although according to polls at the beginning of September, it was claiming more than a quarter of the vote659). Dorenko played a major role in this collapse. Around the world, millions of people

They go through endoprosthetic surgery; it's a medical routine that certainly doesn't prevent people from engaging in politics. However, in that October broadcast, Dorenko not only showed repulsive, graphic footage from a blood-soaked operating room, where part of a bone was being sawed off an unknown woman and a replacement was installed.

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A spinal prosthesis. He was unrestrained in his inventions and exaggerations, spouting nonsense that wouldn't even pass muster. The entire point of the program was to portray Primakov, who had undergone an endoprosthesis, as an old, frail man who would be confined to a hospital ward for years to come. This truly frightened voters—they had been watching Yeltsin's drunken infirmity for several years, as he limped along in a hospital bed. In other words, Yeltsin's "family" was frightening voters with Yeltsin himself. In other issues, Dorenko attacked Luzhkov just as harshly and without much concern for the facts (“Luzhkov is already fleeing abroad, <… > disguised as a man”660) and Skuratov (“he succeeded with prostitutes for the first time in a long time”661), and then again in a circle (don’t think that the other side didn’t defame Yeltsin’s people – they did, although much less giftedly and harshly).

We mentioned Dorenko above, telling how he interviewed the FSB "death squad" hunting Boris Berezovsky after midnight. The truth is that throughout

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For most of the 1990s, Dorenko worked for Berezovsky, the main owner of ORT and a member of Yeltsin's so-called "family." So, by talking about Primakov's joint, Dorenko was also following the oligarch's orders.662 The two, according to those who witnessed their interactions, developed a kind of ideal creative union.

Berezovsky was bursting with ideas, including visual ones. He consulted with Dorenko about what and how to show to hit his rivals harder. "Maybe just show Primakov walking and add sound effects as if he were farting," Berezovsky, pleased with his own design, once discussed this "clever" idea with friends. We couldn't find any video footage from those years where this idea was implemented, but Dorenko was already doing whatever he wanted to the "family's" political opponents. And what about Putin? Of course, he knew how important the TV killer (his second) had been in his rise to power. Thanks to Dorenko's hypnotic bass, Putin's party won the 1999 Duma elections and became the ruling party for decades to come. Speaking of Dorenko's voice, in real life he's a baritone.

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But for his murderous broadcasts about Primakov and company, he deliberately “lowered” his voice to a deep bass663 – for greater suspense.

On January 15, 2000, Putin invited Dorenko to the Kremlin for a half-hour interview.664 It 's worth watching for anyone wanting to understand the evolution of Putin and his relationship with the press. Dorenko began with a question remarkably obsequious: "How are you doing in the new cabinet?" The country's leader had just handed over power to his successor under murky circumstances, a bloody war was raging in Chechnya, Russians were dying in terrorist attacks, but the TV hitman began by asking about the comfort of the new cabinet. When necessary, hitmen became clowns. During the conversation, Dorenko called Putin a "magician" and a "future president," even though the presidential election was still two months away. The Putin in that interview was a completely different Putin, not the laid-back interviewee of today's journalists. He was clearly constrained, his body pressed into the chair, only making passes with his left hand and stamping his right foot. He spoke in a terrible bureaucratic style - all "I must say," "I must note," "I'll repeat it again," and "then." Phrases

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It was clear that Putin had clearly prepared for the interview, literally memorizing certain phrases. Toward the end of the conversation, the interviewee relaxed a little and began to smile condescendingly in response to questions. The two talked a lot about the work of journalists (in Chechnya and in Russia as a whole). Putin's leitmotif was this: journalists often write unverified information; only government agencies can provide them with real facts, and until that happens, society doesn't need to know anything to avoid making mistakes. When he spoke about fakes, Putin smiled sarcastically and looked at Dorenko. Putin specifically said that compromising material has no place in Russian politics. At these words, Dorenko had every reason to look at his interlocutor with a smirk: these two knew how Prosecutor General Skuratov was eliminated with the help of a hidden camera and a couple of girls. In other words, a television killer first ensured the victory of the pro-Kremlin party, and then

made significant efforts to ensure that Putin himself became president in the March elections. One could assume that this was the beginning of many

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years of fruitful collaboration between the president and the creative duo of Dorenko and Berezovsky. But no.

Boris Berezovsky has appeared so often before in our story, which you know many Facts from his biography, but perhaps they didn't create a complete picture of the man. Working as journalists, we communicated with Berezovsky, his friends, colleagues, enemies, and critics, and read countless stories about him. But all of this is superseded by the most accurate quote from one of his close friends and contractors (our interlocutor received fees from Berezovsky for various services): "Boris is an absolutely amoral person. In the sense that he saw no obstacles to achieving his goals. And he is a genius who was always on the move, constantly generating ideas, good and bad. Only one thing could distract him from this incessant brainwork—girls. For the sake of a new girlfriend, he could forget about Putin, about money, about everything."665

Based on other conversations and witnesses, states, we believe that these words perfectly describe

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Berezovsky. We already mentioned that the oligarch's conflict with the president quickly escalated shortly after the March elections. Each side interprets the nature of this conflict differently. Only the beginning is consistent. As soon as Putin won the election, Berezovsky, pleased with himself and the result, joyfully jetted off to the sunny islands with yet another young woman. As was said, "he forgot about Putin, about money, about everything." While Berezovsky was enjoying a long vacation, the new president initiated an important reform—

A package of laws on regional government was introduced to parliament. The significance lay in the fact that these were Putin's very first laws concentrating power in his own hands. Governors were deprived of many political privileges—with one document, Putin destroyed the opposition that his predecessor had been feuding with for years. At this point, the versions of Berezovsky's conflict with Putin diverge. According to Berezovsky himself, his friends, and biographers, the oligarch at that moment...

The cop sensed a threat to democracy and decided to convince his former protégé666. The businessman returned to Moscow and began to seek

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meeting with Putin, and along the way, together with his advisers, wrote the president a lengthy letter explaining why he was wrong. According to people close to Berezovsky, the oligarch first sent this letter personally to Putin (according to one version, the text began with the address "Dear Volodya," because that's how Berezovsky had previously addressed Putin). Putin read it, summoned the author, and firmly rejected all claims. After this, the letter became public—it was published on May 31, 2000, by Kommersant, a newspaper owned by Berezovsky (here, Putin was addressed formally, by his first name and patronymic).667 People on Putin's side interpret the events slightly differently: Berezovsky began using his media to pressure the government, thereby achieving his own benefit, so Putin was forced to respond. In this pair, the rivals were well matched, so both could have been dishonest.

As the oligarch's acquaintances recalled, he had already been in opposition to Putin since the beginning of the summer of 2000, and that is why he was absent from the meeting we described between the president and the richest businessmen at the end of July. To fight Putin,

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Berezovsky still held in his hands a powerful resource that had just brought the president to power—the leading national television channel, ORT (another weapon, albeit a much smaller one, was the newspaper Kommersant). And here's where things got interesting. It turned out that honest journalism could destroy Putin's political career almost faster than commissioned fabrications had ruined the prospects of his opponents. It also turned out that Dorenko was not only an outstanding manipulator but also a talented reporter.

On August 12, 2000, during training torpedo launches in the Barents Sea, the Russian Navy's nuclear submarine Kursk exploded, partially disintegrated, and sank. The fate of the crew remained unknown for many days.

Only much later would it be revealed that all 118 submariners died either at the moment of the explosion or within eight hours of it. Putin personally and the authorities as a whole reacted to the incident with the utmost unprofessionalism and shamelessness. Putin himself was in Sochi on vacation and did not interrupt it for almost the entire first week of the tragedy—

while the military clumsily tried to organize

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rescue operation. By the time the president returned to Moscow from vacation, the death of the crew had become a fact even for the most optimistic. However, the authorities were slow to acknowledge the sailors' deaths, only doing so on August 21, nine days after the disaster.668 As Berezovsky later recalled,669 he managed, although not immediately, to contact the president while he was on vacation and recommended that he immediately cut short his vacation. But he was categorically rebuffed by Putin. Meanwhile, Channel One and Kommersant were doing their job—TV and newspaper journalists had traveled to the Murmansk region, where the submarine base is located. The reports were pessimistic: it was clear that the military was confused in their accounts of the causes of the disaster and the progress of the rescue operation. Particularly outrageous was the military's refusal in the first few days to involve foreign divers in the rescue of the surviving sailors—they were only called in on August 20, when it no longer made any sense. In short, the disaster revealed the same set of problems as later in Nord-Ost and Beslan—unprofessionalism, lies, and concern for one's own image.

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other people's lives. On August 22, Putin arrived in Vidyayevo, a garrison in the Murmansk region where the families of submariners lived. He wasn't even afraid to meet with the relatives of the deceased in the assembly hall of the local Officers' Club, although he probably later deeply regretted it. It was almost three hours of an extremely uncomfortable conversation for Putin . Shouts, demands, and pleas began to ring out from the hall literally from the very first second. Those gathered were, naturally, in a state of extreme nervous agitation—they bombarded the president with accusations, both justified and unfounded. Very soon, the killer question was uttered: "Why didn't you invite foreign specialists right away?!" "I will answer," Putin began to justify himself, but in the end, he never answered the substance. Instead, he said what was really on his mind. He accused television of lying. Here is his answer in full:

— Television? So it's lying. So it's lying. So it's lying. There are people on television who are shouting louder than anyone else today and who, for 10 years, have been destroying that very army and navy in which people are dying today. Today they

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In the forefront of this army's defenders. Also with the goal of discrediting and ultimately destroying the army and navy! They've stolen money over the past few years and are now buying everyone and everything! They've made such laws!

In this passage, Putin was referring both to Vladimir Gusinsky, the owner of NTV, who had already been forced out of the country by that time, and to an even greater extent to Boris Berezovsky, a shareholder in ORT. Channel One did indeed cover the disaster extensively, but if you watch these reports even 25 years later, you won't see anything unfair or unprofessional in them. However, it scared Putin to death. On August 20, two days before his trip to the sailors' widows, he met with Berezovsky in the Kremlin. The meeting, characteristically, took place not in Putin's official office, but on chairs in the reception room of the head of the administration, Alexander Voloshin. This was done to show Berezovsky his new position: he was no longer on an equal footing with the president. At the meeting, which both sides recall approximately identically,671 a short conversation took place: Putin informed Berezovsky that the first television channel

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He would no longer be in charge (the oligarch had a 49% stake, but thanks to Boris Yeltsin's generosity, he managed the asset, even though the state owned 51%), and the state-appointed CEO of ORT would no longer carry out the businessman's orders. Berezovsky was outraged, and that was the end of it. The oligarch left the Kremlin and soon left Russia for good, fearing prison. He never saw Putin again.

However, this is not the end of the story. Although Putin notified Berezovsky of his disgrace, the oligarch still had some trump cards: journalists. The very same transcript of Putin's meeting with the widows was obtained by Kommersant reporters and made public. Recording was prohibited in the assembly hall, monitored by the secret services and Putin's security, so a detailed description of what happened was worth its weight in gold. But the huge article in Kommersant. Vlast magazine672 reached only a small portion of the population—such media outlets were read primarily by wealthy residents of large cities, primarily Moscow. For all Russians to know the truth, a more powerful weapon was needed. Sergei Dorenko once again became that weapon. At the end of August...

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He visited the Murmansk region a hundred years ago, and aired the finished program on September 2. It's a near-perfect television report, meticulous and poignant. Describing it now—

It will only spoil the impression for those who haven't seen it in person. Watch it, it's worth it. As Putin's subordinate at the time recalled,674 the most humiliating line for the president in that episode was probably one line—Dorenko called him a schoolboy who clumsily justifies his wrongdoing. This is an important detail: Putin at the time

He personally watched the television programs he needed, and he watched this one from beginning to end.

How this program was born is unknown. Dorenko later repeated that he himself—based on what he saw in the Murmansk region—decided on this suicidal step.675 Most likely, he was being disingenuous and discussed the topic of his program with Berezovsky, who had a score to settle with Putin. This is also indicated by the fact that almost simultaneously with Dorenko's report, Kommersant published a new open letter from Berezovsky to Putin (the oligarch was very fond of this genre and naturally attracted his

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Media)676. But it doesn't matter anymore who came up with that TV program episode. Sometimes it happens that even immoral people commit a very important act for history. Dorenko was fired from ORT with lightning speed; the Kremlin ensured that he would never be able to work in television again. The shares of the first television channel, which belonged to Berezovsky, were quickly redistributed in favor of a more loyal member of the "family," businessman Roman Abramovich.

speaking.

Putin learned an important lesson from the incident. He knew full well that Dorenko and Berezovsky had just made him president with fake news and sycophancy. The Tsar probably found it hard to believe that these same people were now sincerely fighting for the truth. In part, he can be understood—

The journalists themselves ensured that Putin learned of their venality and lack of principles. Much later, Dorenko claimed that Putin, at the height of the Kursk incident, personally called Channel One and proved to the authorities there that the officers' widows they had shown on air were in fact *"whores hired for a hundred dollars."677* We cannot verify this testimony .

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We can—Dorenko was inclined to embellish his speech with juicy fables. But the idea of the media's venality clearly captivated Putin completely. Dorenko again recalled that shortly before the release of his program about the Kursk, Putin invited him to the Kremlin and offered to "work for him." Berezovsky was already a thing of the past, Putin declared, and the president would "manage Channel One personally." "We want to make it so," the president said, "that your life is comfortable... So that you don't need... I want you to know that we have no problems with this," he wiggled his fingers in the air, as if counting money, "that we have no problems with this."678 When, a couple of days later, Dorenko

released a devastating report from Vidyayevo, Putin probably decided that Berezovsky paid even more for it. As one of our interlocutors recalls,679 Putin was very offended by the fact that in his report, Dorenko unabashedly discussed the president with ordinary people (the video contained interviews with several officers and sailors of the Northern Fleet, including the captain of another nuclear submarine, with residents of Vidyayevo, teachers, children and wives of sailors). Conversation

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In conversation with everyone, Dorenko spoke directly about Putin's inaction, and no one disputed it. Captain First Rank Oleg Yakubina, in response to Dorenko's question: "Our leadership was entangled in lies; this prevented us from trusting the authorities. And how did you feel?"

He looked sadly into the camera, exhaled, and said, "Unfortunately, we weren't feeling our best either." Putin was angered that ordinary people were fearlessly saying nasty things about him to millions of other ordinary people across the country.

In September 2000, Putin traveled to the United States, where he gave his first interview to the popular American TV host Larry

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King. There, when asked, "What happened to the Kursk submarine?" he gave his infamous answer: "It sank," accompanied by a wry grin (which, incidentally, remained on his face throughout almost the entire conversation). A subordinate of Putin's from that time claims that the president later worried about the inappropriateness of his answer. The interlocutor himself explains Putin's behavior in much the same way as another source who commented on the president's interaction with the victims of the Beslan terrorist attack: "He doesn't know how to show emotion. Especially since he didn't want to look weak in front of the Americans. And the question was stupid. As the question goes, so the answer."680
kremlin.ru

Putin was so humiliated by the Kursk affair that it had devastating consequences for the Russian media market, which had never really taken shape. NTV and ORT were taken away from Gusinsky and Berezovsky, and then they were subjugated.

The remaining television companies that showed any independence from the Kremlin were also discredited. One of the African writers of the 20th century came up with a formula describing life on his continent: "Africa is governed by radio."681 Putin, from the very first days of his presidency, understood that Russia is governed by television. If you look at archival reports from Anatoly Sobchak's office, you can see that Putin's boss has a prominent

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There was still a Soviet television set in the same place—to watch the program "600 Seconds." In a video recording from a vacation in the Finnish forests (we mentioned it in the third part of the book), Sobchak and his people joke about television again—like, what if "600 Seconds" shows a story about the mayor of St. Petersburg "gnawing on bones" (at this point, Sobchak was served a plate of fried meat). Their own image on television was a great concern for the new Russian leaders. When Putin became president, many of his subordinates acquired

huge, constantly switched on televisions to watch news broadcasts, and some, especially advanced ones, also installed a monitor next to it to track publications in blogs682.

Having purged the disobedient television people, the Kremlin did the same thing, one after another, first with the print media, then with online publications, and later with social networks and internet search engines. This process took more than 20 years and is still ongoing. Its personal impact on Putin...

It became so much like reading newspapers and turning on the TV.

visor, according to many testimonies, he has long been re-

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became. Nothing that could frighten Putin there will be shown or printed now anyway. The Russian president now consumes news in the form of a regular digest—a paper folder with excerpts from articles and TV programs, prepared for him by Alexei Gromov, an important hero of the subsequent

chapters.

Berezovsky and Gusinsky have not visited Russia since 2000. Berezovsky had numerous criminal cases against him in his homeland; depending on the political situation, he was accused of any number of crimes—from terrorist attacks in Chechnya to political assassinations. He became something like Vladimir Kumarin, Yuri Shutov, or Shamil Basayev—a convenient "scoundrel" whose immorality the Kremlin used to cover its own. Life in exile, where Berezovsky became a fierce critic of Putin, was not very successful for the former oligarch. He squandered his remaining fortune on political adventures, lawsuits with former partners, and, probably, girlfriends. In March 2013, he was found dead in his home in a London suburb. According to the leading theory, which his friends and relatives did not dispute, Berezovsky

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Berezovsky hanged himself, which marked the end of a deep depression. Shortly before his suicide, Berezovsky wrote another letter. He gave it to his former "family" colleague, Roman Abramovich, who retained not only assets in Russia but also a close relationship with Putin. The letter was addressed specifically to Putin. As the Kremlin commented with undisguised pleasure, in the letter, Berezovsky "begged Putin for forgiveness," writing that he had "become confused and made many mistakes."683 One person who read the letter told us684 that it was psychologically very difficult reading. At the end of the letter, Berezovsky asked Putin for only one thing: the opportunity to return to Russia. Gusinsky, living in exile, had followed a somewhat similar path, with the difference that he had confessed to Putin much earlier and to some advantage for himself. As the authors of this book established in one of their

previously published investigations685 , soon after fleeing Russia, Gusinsky reached a “gentleman’s agreement” with Putin, under the terms of which the oligarch renounced his claims to his former media assets, and in exchange

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received the right to sell television series produced by his companies on the Russian market. These series brought Gusinsky a significant income for a long time, which, however, he squandered at an accelerated rate. During more than 20 years abroad, the former owner of NTV had run up so much debt that he went into debt and began selling off assets, simultaneously quarreling with his contractors and creditors. In his personal financial disputes, he, as before, deftly uses journalists—traditionally for money. Po-

Exiled former Yukos shareholders, who once tried to repel a government attack with the help of Gazeta.Ru, continue to exploit journalists for money. Russian soil has never produced TV killers of the caliber and talent of Nevzorov and

Dorenko. Of course, television still has them.

There are people doing roughly the same thing, but the passions have died down considerably. The reason for this is that in a country where the ruler controls all information channels, media wars on the level of the 90s are simply impossible. Therefore, there is no need for killers—now we need paid...

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liars, which will be discussed in the next
heads.

Nevzorov lives outside of Russia, from where he continues to criticize Putin and all Russians with the same artistic flair and disregard for facts. For this, he received Ukrainian citizenship—as it was said, "for outstanding services" to that country.686 His charming unscrupulousness always found sponsors. After the Kursk program, Dorenko could only work on the radio, where he hosted talk shows for many years. However, over the years, nature took its toll again. Hacked emails of a high-ranking Kremlin official in 2014 documented a sad fact: the presidential administration ordered Dorenko what and how to say in public, and he dryly replied, "Understood."687 The journalist died suddenly of an aortic rupture on Victory Day, May 9, 2019, while riding a motorcycle along Moscow's Garden Ring.

One hundred and eighteen people who sank with the Kursk were recovered from the seabed and then buried for two years after the submarine's demise. The sailors' bodies were sent to their families in the city.

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The remains of almost all the officers were interred at the Serafimovskoye Cemetery in St. Petersburg. This necropolis has already become a full-fledged hero of our book. Here, on a small patch of land, were the final resting places of Vladimir Putin's parents, his gangster friend Roman Tsepov, and his fellow Chekist Alexander Grigoriev. Also laid to rest here are the 32 submariners from the Kursk, whose wives Putin likely called "whores." When Gennady Lyachin, the commander of the lost submarine, was said to have been buried in 2002, St. Petersburg residents were expecting the president to arrive. But instead, he

went on vacation again.

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2. Mikhail Ivanovich, The Uzbek and the Brick Factory

How Putin taught journalists to be afraid and to lie even to themselves

It's 2013, the beginning of Vladimir Putin's third presidential term. He's just violently suppressed street protests, and trials are still ongoing in Moscow for those who participated in the protests, to whom the authorities have decided to show who's boss in Russia. In short, the worst is behind the Kremlin, which doesn't mean the country is any less plagued by a variety of complex problems. At that moment, the editors of the Kommersant publishing house gathered for an unusual meeting in an unusual location. Kommersant owner Alisher Usmanov had invited them all to his luxury yacht moored off the coast of Sardinia. This Russian billionaire of Uzbek descent, at the Kremlin's request, purchased Kommersant in 2006 from Boris Berezovsky and his partner, Badri Patarkatsishvili. He bought it to tame it, and he ultimately succeeded. We'll talk about this later, but first let's return to that amazing meeting.

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Usmanov's guests included renowned Russian journalists who had worked at Kommersant and other editorial offices for years. Why was this stellar cast brought to an Italian resort? For no reason. The fact is, Russian oligarchs have developed their own, deeply distorted, notions of journalists. They view them as serfs who can be forced to do things, berated, and occasionally pampered. Berezovsky, who owned Kommersant before Usmanov, once held a similar editorial meeting at his home, where everyone received a valuable gift—

Swiss watches of various brands. Usmanov once sent a courier to a journalist interviewing him with a Hermes Birkin bag worth tens of thousands of dollars (the editors returned the gift, considering it a form of bribery). The oligarch presented another journalist with diamond earrings (we don't know what happened to them)— also for

interview taken from him.

In Sardinia, Usmanov treated the editors to jet skiing, delicious food, and copious amounts of drink. The guests were treated to a piano concert by a young Uzbek virtuoso. "So that you can better

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"They worked," Usmanov said, according to an eyewitness. However, when one of the journalists began boasting about his successes, the media mogul harshly reprimanded him—as a warning.

Another time, having gathered a small group of editors, Usmanov unexpectedly began talking not about journalism, but about female anatomy. He drew the assembled men's attention to the outfit of a dancer whose performance was being broadcast on television at the time. The leotard covered the female genitalia, which attracted the attention of the owner of the country's largest newspaper. Usmanov, who had served time in prison in his youth for a criminal offense (according to one version, for rape688), launched into a detailed account of female genitalia, using a unique prison slang. We will not provide the details of this anatomical discussion.

excursion, retold to us at different times by two former employees of Kommersant689. Another observation of our interlocutors is important: despite the discomfort and the well-known absurdity of what was happening, the editors were forced to listen to the owner’s speeches and, only when he finished, probably switched to discussing something

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more appropriate. Most of the Russian journalistic community has long understood that it's not worth arguing with media owners, even if they say and do bad things.

Usmanov was just one of Putin's loyal nobles tasked with taking control of media outlets previously owned by the recalcitrant oligarchs of the Yeltsin era. In the chapter above, we provided a partial list of newspapers and television networks that emerged in the country at the turn of the century, when various business groups began investing in the media and then exploiting them for their own ends. This practice alarmed Putin, and during his first two terms, the Kremlin launched a reverse process. Media outlets, both central and provincial, gradually but inevitably passed into the hands of either businessmen guaranteed to be loyal to the government or directly to the state. This, naturally, was done not to shield hapless journalists from interference by financial moguls in their work, but to ensure that only one player had the right to interfere in this work—the Kremlin, or, more precisely, Vladimir Putin himself. It would be appropriate now too.

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provide an inventory, again incomplete, of media assets as of the period of Putin’s “mature” (2012–
2024).

— **Yuri Kovalchuk** and his associates — Channel One, which was once taken from Berezovsky. The stake of another "family member," Roman Abramovich, also eventually went to Kovalchuk.

— **Yuri Kovalchuk** and persons associated with him — numerous media outlets that are part of the National Media Group (including the federal television channel REN TV and the newspaper Izvestia, as well as numerous online publications and almost all of the media in St. Petersburg).

— **Yuri Kovalchuk,** persons associated with him, and Gazprom—a multitude of media outlets that are part of the Gazprom-Media holding company (including the federal television channel NTV, once taken over from Vladimir Gusinsky).

- **Yuri Kovalchuk** and those associated with him
faces - social network "VKontakte" (later VK).

— **Alisher Usmanov,** a billionaire loyal to Putin, sponsor of the locum tenens president Dmitry Medvedev — the publishing house "Kom-

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"mersant": in addition to the newspaper, it included, at various times, several other printed and online publications.

— **Grigory Berezkin,** a businessman loyal to Putin, — the RBC holding company, which includes the website of the same name, the largest news resource on the Russian Internet.

Alexander **Mamut,** a businessman loyal to the government, owned the major online media outlets Lenta.ru and Gazeta.ru (at one point, he co-owned the latter with Usmanov). Later, these same media outlets were acquired by the state-owned bank Sberbank.

But let's return to Usmanov—he was very colorful himself, and the editorial staff he was tasked with pacifying was very important and influential. Having just replaced Berezovsky as the owner of Kommersant, Usmanov arrived at the office. Two of the newspaper's journalists recall that the reporters probably found the state of the linoleum in the newsroom to be the most pressing topic of discussion with the new owner. "Yes, your linoleum is certainly crap. We'll change it," Usmanov told editor-in-chief Vladislav Borodulin. The next day, Usmanov invited Borodulin to his office.

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Moscow house. There, sitting beneath a huge portrait of his wife, gymnastics coach Irina Viner, Usmanov announced without preamble: "I was told that when you buy a newspaper, it's customary to replace editors-in-chief. So we're parting ways." Of course, the reason for his dismissal wasn't some obviously fictitious tradition. Borodulin had run the newspaper under Berezovsky, the Kremlin's main enemy at the time. That's precisely why he was fired. But the editorial board seemed unnoticed by this obvious act of censorship, unlike the quality of the linoleum in the office.

In 2011, Gazeta.Ru, where one of the authors of this book still worked, was also owned by Usmanov through a chain of owners. I, Roman Badanin, was then deputy editor-in-chief, responsible for the most problematic areas for the Kremlin: domestic policy, public

topical issues, daily news and columns. In short, our agenda during that period consisted almost exclusively of events related first to the parliamentary (December 4, 2011) and then the presidential (March 4, 2012) elections. The results of the first of these two plebiscites were grossly and openly falsified.

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The protests were categorized in favor of Putin's United Russia party, triggering a chain of events now commonly known by the capacious toponym "Bolotnaya." These are the very same anti-Putin rallies from December 2011 to May 2012 (the most famous of which took place on Bolotnaya Square near the Kremlin), which frightened and angered the authorities, forcing the Russian tsar to invent a thoroughly hypocritical ideology of "spiritual bonds." It was then that it became clear why Putin needed Usmanov. On December 1, 2011, three days before the elections, the owner of the Gazeta.Ru website removed a special interactive project, which the editorial staff had developed jointly with the public monitoring organization "Golos," from its website. To put it simply, our project allowed any voter in the country to report any violations they observed—from ballot stuffing to illegal campaigning. It was a project that aimed at the very heart of the state's election fraud machine. It had to be shut down before election day by any means necessary, even though all it took was one expert on female anatomy. That same day, I filed a complaint.

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After resigning in protest against the owner's actions, I got very drunk with colleagues that evening, and on the morning of December 2nd, I visited the editorial office for the last time—to collect the personal belongings that had accumulated there over 10 years of work. It was a very stressful moment in my career, but one I never regretted. No less dramatic events took place at the Kommersant editorial office at the end of 2011.

As has already been said, the December 4 election results were mercilessly rigged in favor of United Russia—there was ample evidence of this, because at that time independent observers could still work almost unhindered at polling stations. Even those editorial boards owned by Kremlin stooges like Usmanov found it difficult to ignore evidence of violations. Kommersant published several articles about voter protests in Moscow. One evening after the election, several editors-in-chief of media outlets affiliated with the publishing house were contacted by Usmanov's people.691 Everyone was ordered to appear at a Moscow restaurant—the meeting was scheduled for

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It was 11 p.m. Usmanov, who greeted them, was agitated: "The country is in danger, now is not the time for your criticism!" Sitting next to the owner were his managers, Ivan Streshinsky and Ivan Tavrin, who were responsible for his media assets. Usmanov proposed an unexpected move: "You're setting me up! Why are they screwing me, but I'm not touching you? Let's go right now to Gromov, let him screw you." He was referring to Alexei Gromov, the deputy head of the presidential administration responsible for censorship in the country. At midnight, the Kommersant editorial board set off for his office on Staraya Square in several cars. A former Kommersant employee describes what happened in Gromov's office as "political education." Gromov didn't dictate how to cover the protests or the election results—he simply let the journalists know whose side was more profitable and safer for them to be on. The interlocutor remembered the Kremlin boss's remark: "Do you think we're afraid of the protests?! That we don't have enough truncheons for everyone?" Gromov smoked cigarette after cigarette as he spoke, and the very fact of the urgent meeting after midnight suggested that the protests did, in fact, frighten Gromov and his boss.

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When greater toughness was required, Usmanov and the Kremlin readily agreed. That same December, Kommersant.Vlast magazine, which had once published the transcript of his meeting with the widows of submariners that had infuriated Putin, again

seriously angered the ruler. The December 12 issue featured several articles dedicated to the elections. Among them was a report on Russians voting in the UK, where one of the illustrations was a spoiled ballot—

It had written on it in large letters: “Putin, go fuck yourself!”692 That issue also contained plenty of other sedition—for example, it published a column by one of the authors of this book, who had just lost his job at Gazeta.Ru.

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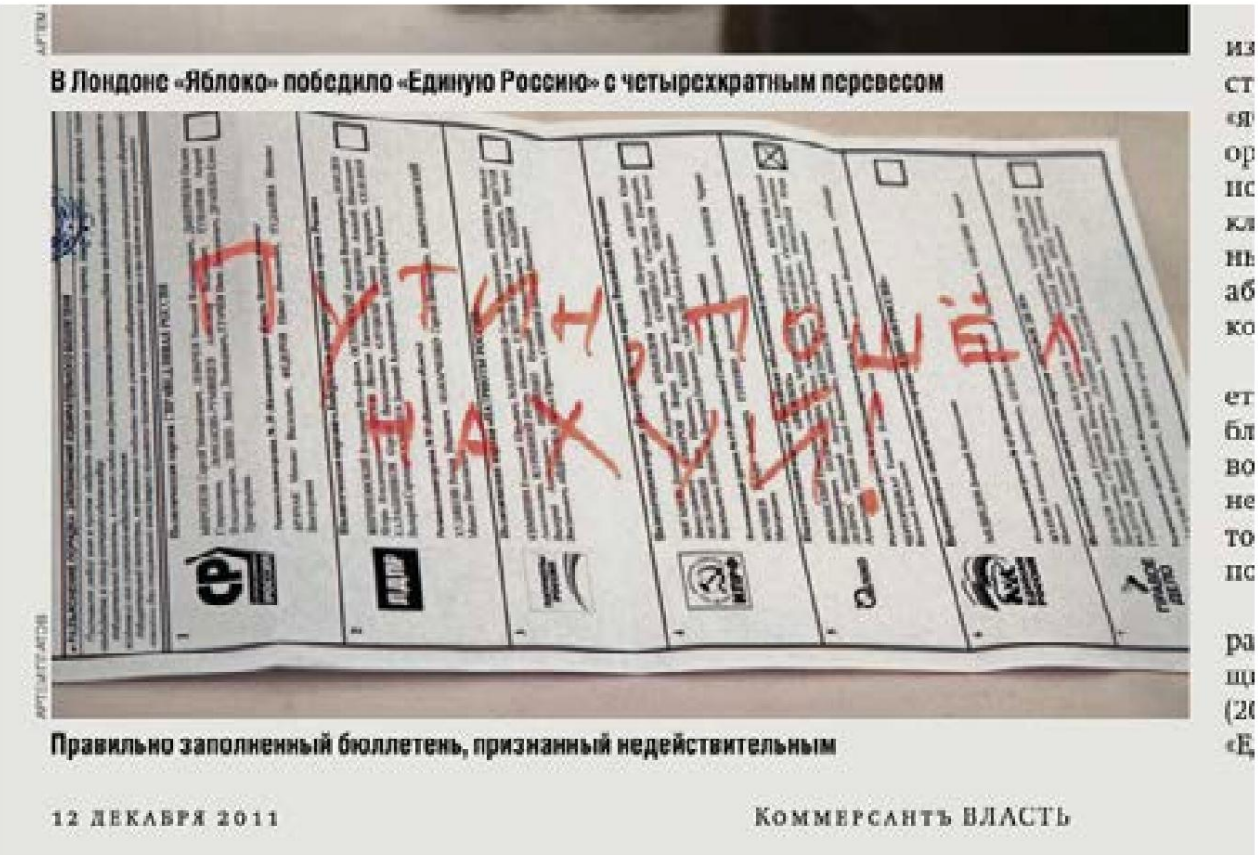

The photograph's piquancy was further enhanced by the fact that the spoiled ballot was photographed in London, where Boris Berezovsky, the former owner of Kommersant and Putin foe, was then living. The caption beneath the article also caught my attention: Artem Platov. A source close to the Kremlin once let it slip in a private conversation: the authorities were allegedly convinced that the seditious document was a bulletin from Berezovsky himself, who had requested that a paper insulting Putin be published in his former publication. High-ups also suspected a hint in the author's signature—"Platov" was Putin's code name during his time at the KGB academy.693 The author, whom we spoke with years later and whose name is indeed Artem Platov, scoffs at these hypotheses —neither the bulletin nor his name are a provocation, he says with a smile.694

Kommersant-Vlast, December 12, 2011

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Then everything happened quickly -
Back on the weekend, when the issue was submitted to the printers, its contents became known to the owner.695 The managers were ordered to appear on Sunday at Usmanov's country house in the Moscow region (the same one with the giant portrait of his wife). Only the editor-in-chief of the rebellious magazine, Maxim Kovalsky, did not show up or was not summoned. At a meeting outside the city, Usmanov announced the collectiv-
He realized that he wouldn't tolerate this, and therefore fired Kovalsky. "Let this be a lesson to you," a participant in that meeting recalled Usmanov saying.696

Dozens of Kommersant employees wrote an open letter in support of their colleague697, but
Following her boss, only Kovalsky's deputy, Veronika Kutsyllo, ultimately resigned. The rest resigned; the journalists learned their lesson.

If I were to try to sum up this lesson in one phrase, it would be: "We work until the first article is taken down." Each of the book's authors has heard these words, in various variations, more than once from journalists at Kommersant and other censored media outlets. Thousands of journalists across the country have used this phrase.

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They explain to the country why they continue to work at their publications despite the fact that they are not allowed to investigate corruption and the regime's crimes, are forbidden from even approaching certain topics, and their editors are fired without objective reasons. Let's face it, we ourselves have worked under this rule.

Another author of this book, Mikhail Rubin, was a correspondent for the politics department at Izvestia newspaper in the same pre-election year of 2011. Now it seems obvious that I was bound to encounter censorship there, since the publication was already under the control of Yuri Kovalchuk, a friend of Putin. But all my worries were outweighed by the joy of my first job at a major newspaper. My superiors also promised that Izvestia would be objective, and I really wanted to believe it. To be completely honest, I made that same compromise with myself back then: I'd work "until the first article was taken down." The renowned biologist Jared Diamond once asked himself:698 What was the resident of the once-green Easter Island thinking when he cut down the last remaining tree there? The answer is simple—for that man, there was no longer any last tree. The forest...

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The trees were gradually cut down over several generations of islanders, who eventually stopped considering them valuable. Eventually, the last lumberjack chopped down the tree, which meant nothing to him. In Russian media, too, there is no "last tree," a specific and irrevocable act of censorship that changes everything. The "cutting down" of texts occurs gradually and involuntarily becomes the norm for editorial offices.

The opposition protests at the turn of 2011–2012 were sympathized with by the overwhelming majority of Izvestia staff. At first, I thought the editorial board could operate without contradicting its principles. But this was a delusion. At the height of the protests, other political correspondents and I were summoned to a private meeting with the newspaper's manager, Aram Gabrelyanov, whom the editorial staff usually called Aram Ashotych or "Boss." This man had made a career in the tabloid press (his main creation was the newspaper "Life"), where he had established himself as a sensationalist editor. In the 2000s, his "yellow" media, which was gaining increasing popularity, attracted the attention of the Kremlin.

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So much so, in fact, that they offered the Chief to sell his publications to a businessman connected to the government. Aram Ashotych, an Armenian originally from Derbent in Dagestan, displayed true Caucasian cunning. He replied that for Putin's sake he was ready to give up his assets for free. 699 The Kremlin was so impressed with the answer that they not only kept Life for Gabrelyanov, but also entrusted him with managing Izvestia in Kovalchuk's interests. Aram Ashotych was very proud of his contacts at the top, spending long periods in Kremlin offices for discussions, and he must have emerged from one of them when, at the height of the protests, he summoned the Izvestia journalists. We sat at the oval table. Gabrelyanov knew how to avoid preludes: "The situation is changing. *Perhaps* the newspaper will have to take a patriotic stance." Someone here

He latched onto the word "possibly," which inspired some optimism. Aram Ashotych didn't go into details, instead switching to the difficult situation in his family—allegedly, one of his sons turned out to be a "white ribbon" (that is, a supporter of the opposition), and the other was favorably disposed toward the authorities. In short, the Chief left broken.

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to fight with the children, and we were left to reflect on what we had heard. "If things get tough, I'll quit"—that phrase from one of my editors struck a chord with me. Of course, no one quit then, because no final, irreversible nastiness had happened immediately, and the articles began to be "cut" gradually. After some time (and under the false slogan of fighting for objectivity), Gabrelyanov began demanding that the politics department put comments at the end of important articles by experts loyal to the authorities, that is, political scientists who, as numerous investigations later showed, were on the Kremlin's payroll. So that this step would not seem too obvious,

The volume of censorship also allowed the use of quotes from independent experts, but their words "should not summarize the texts." Then—

A new scourge, but again gradually: the editor-in-chief began increasingly sending our articles to the Chief for proofreading (which, of course, shouldn't happen), and he often returned them with some fragment cut out. Some more time passed, and I suspected the obvious: Aram Ashotych wasn't editing the notes himself, but secretly sending them back to the authors.

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to official functionaries of United Russia or employees of the presidential administration, depending on the topic. So, changes to the articles are more likely

In fact, they were the ones who contributed

everything. My story of upheaval is probably typical of many Russian journalists. I quit Izvestia a few months after that meeting about the "patriotic position," but was soon forced to return, unable to find work in independent media, which were becoming increasingly rare by then. My last "tree" didn't come until 2013—then Izvestia published an obviously commissioned article about Alexei Navalny. I knew that no one on the editorial staff had written the text, and I concluded simply: the material had been sent to Gabrelyanov from the Kremlin. So I was unemployed for exactly six months, until I found a position at RBC, where the pay was half as much but they didn't follow the instructions of the Putin administration. Incidentally, Gabrelyanov himself later followed the path of journalists who lost their jobs at the behest of the Kremlin. In 2016, Kovalchuk took control of the newspaper from Aram Ashotych, and then almost all of it

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other media outlets, including the "yellow" media he created. Leaving aside the financial implications of the matter, the explanation for this disgrace is this: Aram Ashotych, although a loyal scribbler, stood out too much from the gray, nameless mass of minions with his scandalous nature.

For those who want to get a sense of his character, we recommend searching online for a recording of a meeting in which the Chief berates his reporters. Be prepared to hear choice expletives literally every other word—Gabrelyanov was furious over a mere typo in a news headline. This was enough to make him call his subordinates "faggots."

ourselves."

To curse the journalists of their publications -

This is par for the course for Usmanov, too. “He would instantly give everyone nicknames and then only use them,” recalls a former editor-in-chief in Usmanov’s media empire, who was himself periodically referred to by his boss as “that tall one .”701 No one told us about any attempts by reporters to resist this kind of treatment. Journalists would call Usmanov “Uzbek” or “Shareholder” behind his back. Nicknames are a phenomenon.

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which says much more about Putin's power than it might seem. Under Vladimir Putin, as once under Joseph Stalin and Leonid Brezhnev, nicknames have become an important part of political parlance, an integral element of that same self-censorship. When they fear wiretapping, denunciation, or "who knows what else," subordinates call Putin "VV" (this is the most respectful form we know), and Usmanov's employees call him "Shareholder" (Kommersant never issued any shares, and the publication had no other co-owners, so there is no factual basis for such a nickname). For more trusted interlocutors who will understand the subtext and not rat on him, "Uzbek" for Usmanov and "Mikhail Ivanovich" for Putin would be appropriate. Someday, someone should definitely write a study of the political folklore of the Putin era, in which his nicknames will occupy an important place.

place:

— Sam;

— Most Serene, First and Supreme;

— Chief, Master and Leader;

— Director of a brick factory;

— and, of course, the Tsar.

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These are the nicknames we have heard for Putin.
at various times from officials and journalists working in the Kremlin. They are all obsequious: this is how they talk behind their backs about someone they either respect or, more likely, fear. With those nicknames for Putin that ordinary people, albeit with caution, use— *Mol, Bunker Grandpa, Putin ,* and so on—

They can't be compared. The same tradition has spread down the power vertical: all ministers and governors have nicknames. Some nicknames are used to show respect, others to criticize them behind their backs, because under Putin, criticizing the government publicly and with rational arguments, rather than offensive comparisons, has become impossible.

Putin himself, by the way, likes to show off his "Democratic" and "tolerance for criticism." For example, after the scandal with the obscene newsletter and the dismissal of the editor-in-chief of the magazine "Vlast," the president was asked at a press conference what he thought about it all. He grinned and said: "I saw this inscription, it really amused me and even pleased me."702 Then

Putin admitted that he was aware of the circumstances of the publication of the obscene language: the bulletin was sent from London.

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Don, he said, "and we know who gathered there and why they're not returning to Russia" (thereby indirectly confirming the theory that the Kremlin believed that Berezovsky had orchestrated the publication of the bulletin). Of course, this was hypocritical tolerance. Insults and mockery greatly anger Putin, as we know from several examples.

In the early 1990s, there was a prominent politician in St. Petersburg, Dmitry Filippov, first a party official and then a resourceful businessman. He and Deputy Mayor Putin were constantly at odds over property. First, Filippov lost a battle for Bank Rossiya, which was privatized by Putin's friends. Then he fought for control of the city's fuel market.

In the end, the Tambovites, who were assisted by Putin, won. In short, Filippov had reason to dislike the deputy mayor. He was a stately man, with a wild head of hair and a booming voice, and never minced his words, so he constantly called his competitor a "runt," not particularly caring if anyone was listening in. Putin was informed, and he gave Filippov a life sentence.

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He fell into disfavor—for example, he was stripped of his government position. Of course, criticizing someone's appearance is an ethically questionable practice, but Filippov may be spared from condemnation by the fact that he's long since died. In 1998, this talker had part of his head blown off by a bomb planted in a light fixture in the entryway of his building. Investigators claimed that the bomb was planted by Yuri Shutov's men, but who ordered it remains unclear (yet another cold case).

Mockery over his height and appearance haunted Putin for a time. In late January 2000, NTV aired an episode of the satirical show "Dolls," in which the future president was portrayed as a Hoffmann-esque character—Little Tsakhes, a dwarf, hideous both inside and out, who, thanks to a fairy's spell, is perceived by those around him as a handsome prince. This was a political (NTV was then supporting opponents of Putin and the "family") and a personal insult—Putin, according to insiders, took it as a reference to his short stature and unremarkable appearance. The episode of "Dolls" later became one of the reasons for NTV's demise.

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Another episode occurred in August 2000, the aforementioned final meeting between Putin and Berezovsky in the office of the head of the Kremlin administration. This is the last known instance of anyone arguing face-to-face with Putin. The oligarch and the president raised their voices. At one point, Berezovsky began shouting, but Putin stood up and, without offering his hand, left.706 As we now know, Berezovsky became Putin's personal enemy after that, until his death. Finally, in 2023, Putin's once-loyal servant, Yevgeny Prigozhin—you've already read his story—in a fit of intense but not entirely explicable emotion, recorded a video message from the front lines in Ukraine. He lamented the shortage of ammunition and the failures of military planning, but also said the following:

"And the happy old man thinks he's happy. So what's the country supposed to do next? If he turns out to be right, God bless everyone. But what's the country supposed to do, what's our children, our grandchildren, the future of Russia supposed to do, and how can we win the war if, by chance—I'm just guessing—it turns out this old man is a complete and utter idio

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In his video, Prigozhin did not name Putin.
tina, but viewers could assume that they were most likely talking about him. Soon after, Prigozhin will begin his rebellion, which will ultimately lead to his death. You will say that in each case - from the St. Petersburg story to Prigozhin's rebellion -

Putin had political, not personal, reasons for dealing with his offenders. This is true. But there is also truth in the words of our interlocutor, who worked with Putin back in St. Petersburg: the Russian leader is very offended by mockery, even those that he heard from a third party and which may turn out to be completely untrue. 708. Even during the late Soviet era,

the law "on the protection of the honor and dignity of the President of the USSR." This was clear: Mikhail Gorbachev,
The only person to bear this title was disliked by many for the collapse of the Soviet system and democratic innovations. For example, not a single leftist or nationalist politician in the country could help but ridicule his birthmark on his forehead. Under Yeltsin, although his name and appearance

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Bad habits also often became the basis for malicious jokes; there was no such law. Under Putin, the standard article on "insulting a government official" was initially applied. It was under this article, for example, that an Ivanovo newspaper was fined in 2006 for publishing an article.

"Putin as a phallic symbol of Russia"709. But with
Over time, this proved to be insufficient, and during Putin's third presidential term, the so-called "law on disrespect for authority" was passed.710 Of course, it is intended to suppress criticism of almost any person vested with state powers.

From the local police officer to the president. But in reality, the overwhelming majority of charges under this article were brought against those who insulted Putin . You might say that Putin himself was innocent of this wave of repression against his detractors; it was the initiative of local authorities. And you'd be largely right. It's quite possible that the same thing happened with the ballot where Putin was told to fuck off. The president himself may not have immediately learned about this publication. But his clerks and the servile owner of Kommersant decided to play it safe, to "play it safe," as they say.

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In Russian editorial offices. Making everyone around you fear the consequences—that's the essence of self-censorship, a fantastic weapon invented under Putin to hide the truth from the country.

It's difficult to say whether there was a specific person in Putin's inner circle who devised a press strategy that made it possible, without major repression, to make almost the entire media industry dependent on the Kremlin. Most likely, no such person existed, and the bulk of the work was done by human nature itself: fear and self-interest. But there is certainly someone who has been ensuring that fear and self-interest do not falter for a quarter of a century. This is Alexei Gromov, now the first deputy head of the presidential administration, and at the beginning of the Putin era, the head of state's press secretary. A tall, severely balding man with a pockmarked face and a quiet voice. It was to him that Alisher Usmanov brought Kommersant managers for a dose of fear on the night of December 2011. The entire Russian journalistic elite has been going to him for the same thing for the past 25 years. Every week Gromov held (and probably still holds) a meeting of the editors of the main

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The country's television channels, a mix of state and private, are told what to cover and how, what can be shown and what can't. Gromov or one of his people can simply call the editors-in-chief of newspapers and websites about any article or even a word in it. And the editors-in-chief and owners themselves are required to maintain regular contact with Gromov—to demonstrate their loyalty, so to speak. As Vladislav Borodulin, whom Usmanov fired from Kommersant as soon as he bought the newspaper, says: "If you don't call Gromov for six months, then you're no longer one of us."

To describe how this chain of command works, let's share another personal story. At Gazeta.Ru, where Roman Badanin worked, there was a government pool correspondent (a group of journalists permanently accredited to the cabinet of ministers and covering its work) who had the misfortune of angering Gromov. In 2008, she released a report on the preparations for Putin's first press conference as prime minister (fun fact: Gromov was working in the Kremlin at the time, but still subservient to

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to his boss, who, for the sake of appearances, moved into the government)713. The report was short and trivial; it seemed that nothing discrediting the government could be written in there, even if one really wanted to. The main

The main content of the text is the journalist's account of new rules for working with the press, introduced specifically for Putin. She wrote, for example, that reporters, while waiting for the event to begin, were doing whatever they could. She also noted that Putin's security, for some reason, refused to let the bored press out of the hall, making the wait even more onerous. It was just a passing text, less than a page long. But it set in motion a massive censorship machine, involving no less than a Putin aide and one of the country's top billionaires. The article infuriated Gromov. The fact is, it was then that he once again decided to change the lives of Russian journalists—naturally, for the worse. Fearing information leaks and uncontrolled communication with sources, Gromov banned government-accredited reporters from leaving the hall for press interviews. Previously, they would run to the canteen on another floor and under this pretext know-

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We contacted sources within the cabinet of ministers. One particularly nosy (in a good, professional sense) reporter managed to obtain and be the first to publish the approved emblem for the Sochi Olympics. Now, the government's special employee could only allow journalists to run to the toilet at most. And then our report appeared, with its sparse criticism of the new rules. What did Gromov do? He printed out the online article on official paper and covered the page with numerous notes in pen (Gromov doesn't like or understand modern technology, so the use of paper and pen is more or less understandable). He

He picked on almost every word, even every punctuation mark, but what infuriated Gromov most was a short phrase: "[While waiting for the event to begin, the journalists] calmly leafed through the newspapers." Gromov circled these words repeatedly, surrounded by a slew of exclamation points and, written in his own hand, "Calmly?!" The curator of fear and self-interest clearly disliked the rustling of newspaper pages at a time when the press should have been holding its breath, awaiting orders from above.

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Gromov then faxed this article, printed on stamped paper, to Alexander Mamut.

This is one of Putin's oligarchs, who at that time co-owned Gazeta.Ru with Alisher Usmanov. He understood the order correctly and forwarded a fax to the editor-in-chief of Gazeta.Ru with a request that the author of the "impudent" report no longer send it to the government. And so the whole team stood there, astonished, watching the documentary, handwritten act of censorship, creaking out of the fax. We pretended not to notice the anger, but Gromov simply revoked the journalist's accreditation, and she was no longer allowed into the Government House.

of the state.

Now you can imagine the extent to which Gromov was involved in the lives of Russian journalists for years. And now imagine that, despite all this, not a single article about Gromov appeared in Russian newspapers or magazines for many years. Who is he anyway? In 2019, the authors of this book published the first investigation into Gromov.714 From there, readers learned about the secret business of Putin's aide, about the expensive house Gromov built for money clearly exceeding his official...

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Social income, and much more—for example, we discovered that the real name of this master of censorship was not Gromov at all, but Grobov (he changed it for euphony). In other words, for many years, the careers of journalists were controlled by a man whose real name they didn't even know. But the most important thing about that investigation was, perhaps, not its content. In the months that we were preparing the text, we became the targets of a large-scale defamatory attack from the Kremlin. Gromov's subordinate publications wrote nasty things about us, accusing us of provocations commissioned by the US, and the culmination was the landing of a film crew from a Russian state television channel at Stanford, where one of the authors was interning at the time. An RT reporter made her way to a small outbuilding in Palo Alto rented by Roman Badanin. In report 715, this temporary structure, where only a woolen blanket saved you from the cold day and night, was

presented as a multi-million dollar home. In this story, Gromov and the entire Putin censorship he leads are all lies,

intimidate journalists and sources, use state resources for personal purposes.

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Gromov has been by Putin's side for 25 years. One acquaintance called him "the president's old slippers, so comfortable you can't throw them away."716 We were also in Gromov's office on Staraya Square—fortunately, not as people who came for instructions. We—each in our own separate ways, at different times—met with him as a newsmaker on Kremlin-related topics. His office deserves a separate description: it's a very lived-in office, with a ton of personal belongings accumulated over years of service. An inconspicuous door to the side leads to an even more private "back office"—where Gromov smoked cigarettes, despite the legal ban on smoking in government buildings. The walls are hung with photographs, and there's hiking gear. This office—

Like a house, it's furnished in such a way that it's clear to everyone that its owner has no plans to ever leave. The same picture can be seen in the offices of many of Putin's longtime employees—they (not always justifiably) believe they've found their jobs for good.

Managing journalists through self-interest turned out to be even easier than through fear. Nowhere in the world is journalism even remotely

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profitable occupation, but reporters' salaries in Russia have always been particularly low. Early in his career, one of the authors of this book earned $300 a month, which also paid

In the black, that is, they handed over three hundred-dollar bills in an envelope. The second author's first salary was about $700, but this time under a legal scheme (albeit almost 10 years later). These figures roughly corresponded to the level of salaries in our labor market at that time. Therefore, any promotion with an increase in pay was always perceived as a desirable goal. And if you followed Gromov's instructions, you could indeed achieve a favor unheard of among journalists.

states.

A few days before the start of the new year, 2015, I, Mikhail Rubin, was invited to the presidential administration building. Officials were celebrating the upcoming holiday at work and invited reporters from several media outlets for tea and cookies. I found myself in a strange position at this company: RBC, the publication where I worked as a special correspondent, was not well-regarded by the Kremlin. RBC was one of the last, or perhaps the most, remaining

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and the last major media outlet that Gromov and his clerks couldn't order around (we'll talk about that later). This apparently angered them, which influenced the outcome of that meeting. Behind the outward openness lurked an unpleasant surprise: at some point, one of the Kremlin aides, unbeknownst to the others, invited me into the next room. "This is a gift from Timur," said my interlocutor, referring to the deputy head of the domestic policy department, Timur Prokopenko, already mentioned in this book. The aide held a thick, half-open envelope. You didn't have to be a Kremlin correspondent to figure it out: the envelope was stuffed with five-thousand-ruble bills. At that moment, I was overcome by only one desire—to calculate how much they wanted to buy me for. Even at first glance, it was obvious that the sum was several times greater than my monthly salary (at that time, about a thousand dollars in foreign currency). But I don't know what was behind this scene: either they really wanted to bribe me, or they were trying to organize a provocation, for example, to photograph an envelope with money in my hands. I said I wouldn't touch the money. "Then

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"Between us," the aide responded calmly and put away the "gift." Since then, officials haven't tried to buy me with envelopes, but they've offered something more. Already in 2019, that same Prokopenko said that the head of the state-owned bank VTB, Andrei Kostin, wanted to create "his own media outlet" and was looking for an editor-in-chief. The hint was this: if I lost my desire to work in independent journalism, the Kremlin could arrange a different career with much greater profit for me. I remember my interlocutor's words well: "Take advantage of *the system.* You can name your own salary. If you want a Lamborghini—"

"They'll give it to you as a gift." I didn't even respond to the offer. But there were always plenty of journalists around who were being bought. The once-independent Kommersant and Vedomosti newspapers employed the feisty financial journalist Nailya Asker-zade. She wasn't shy about asking officials and bankers tough questions—including that same Kostin, Putin's acquaintance, allegedly with a KGB past. Then, at the age of 24, the journalist became the mistress, then the common-law wife, and the mother of the 55-year-old banker's children.

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It's hard to say what motivated Asker-zade—desire or wealth. But she certainly achieved the latter. Quickly and without regard for morality or the law, the young woman suddenly acquired a luxury jet, a yacht, and a palace on Rublyovka. She also had her own show on the state-run Rossiya television channel, in which she conducted now obsequious interviews with members of Putin's inner circle. Such a career twist is commonly described among Russian journalists as "changing one's shoes."

Despite the age difference, Kostin and Asker-zade's relationship was not without romance. In 2015, the couple unveiled a memorial plaque in New York City's Central Park.

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They were required to make a donation of at least $10,000.

Anti-Corruption Foundation

TV presenter Vladimir Solovyov once criticized the government and did it so sharply that the opposition The Kremlin even wanted the journalist among its ranks. But when independent television channels began to close in Russia, Solovyov toned down his rhetoric. In 2009, he still managed to somehow displease the authorities and was suddenly fired from NTV, which had long been under Kremlin control. The prospect of being penniless frightened Solovyov so much that he began going from high-ranking officials to begging for forgiveness. As an eyewitness to this personal drama recounts , the journalist eventually managed to secure an audience with Putin (then Prime Minister). We don't know what guarantees Solovyov gave at that meeting, or what promises Putin made. But if we recall the president's secret conversation with Dorenko, in which he gestured toward banknotes, we can assume that the journalist secured a guarantee of a generous reward for his loyal service. Soon Solovyov got a job on the state channel “Russia” and “changed his shoes” so radically that he

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Now he's vying for the title of a symbol of Kremlin propaganda. He's long since become a symbol of hypocrisy. Because, while constantly criticizing the West, Solovyov acquired a luxurious villa in Italy—and by no means only there. His love for Putin made the journalist so rich that he bought himself real estate worth approximately a billion rubles.

Solovyov's main rival for the title of alpha propagandist is Dmitry Kiselyov. He once spoke about the importance of freedom of speech and spoke of his love for Ukraine, where he worked in the early 2000s. Now this TV host curses the neighboring country, calls for turning the United States into radioactive ash and "burning the hearts of gays."719 Kiselyov's apartment in Moscow alone is worth $4.5 million, and he also owns at least a dacha in the Moscow region and a villa near Koktebel. The Russian Foreign Ministry even once held a briefing for journalists in Kiselyov's Crimean home.720 Not exactly to show budding reporters how much wealth can be achieved through flattery, nor exactly to demonstrate the lack of distinction between public and private. Incidentally, a useful reminder: Solovyov, Kiselyov, and Asker-zade

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They work for a state television channel, they are government officials who receive their salaries from the taxes of Russian citizens.

However, among the great propagandists, there is an undisputed star – Margarita Simonyan, who simultaneously heads three Kremlin-subordinate editorial boards: RT (a foreign-language propaganda television channel for foreign audiences), the Rossiya Segodnya news agency (political online content for Russians), and Sputnik (the same for foreign audiences). In a different situation, Simonyan could easily have become the heroine of several prestigious ratings at once – she is a successful woman who achieved recognition even before her 30th birthday. In 2005, when Simonyan was

She was appointed editor-in-chief of the state-owned television channel RT when she was barely 25. However, her story wasn't exactly glossy magazine fare. The young woman, from an ordinary Krasnodar family, really wanted to become a television journalist and had plenty of potential—she was active, spoke well, and spoke English. At the end of 1999, Simonyan was in Chechnya with the advancing Russian troops.

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from where she produced several reports for state television.721 Naturally, they were entirely in line with the Kremlin's general line. Simonyan was quickly transferred to Rostov-on-Don, and from there to Moscow—at 22, she became a correspondent for state television in the Kremlin's pool of journalists (reporters from the pool are permanently accredited to the president of the country and cover his work and travels). This

A common and telling practice about the country is sending young female journalists, often without much experience or knowledge, but with attractive appearances (the same thing happened with Asker-zade), to government agencies as reporters. The editors believed that pretty girls had a better chance of getting exclusive news. Russian politics, despite what the Kremlin says, is still a man's world, where officials are allowed to do too much, even grope female journalists with impunity, as in the case of Leonid Slutsky. Journalist Elena Tregubova, who worked in the Kremlin's press pool until the early 2000s, once described how high-ranking officials, including future Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Prikhodko, harassed her. Later

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The same person would become the hero of another sex scandal, which perhaps might not have happened if society and the authorities had responded to Tregubova's words. Another journalist, who worked in St. Petersburg in the mid-90s, recalls how she was invited on a date by the vice-mayor of Putin himself.

tin—or rather, asked to convey the necessary words and a bouquet of roses from Igor Sechin, the chief of his own staff (he, as you may have noticed, is Putin's go-to person for women).723 Young Margarita Simonyan was

patronized by Alexei Gromov—it was he who insisted on appointing the young woman editor-in-chief of RT in 2005. By that time, Simonyan had already earned significant service to the Kremlin. Margarita met the morning of September 1, 2004, in Arkhyz, a resort town in Karachay-Cherkessia. Putin was expected to attend a celebration at one of the local schools to mark the start of the school year, so the presidential journalists were brought there in advance. Putin, however, did not arrive—probably because terrorists had seized a school in Beslan, in neighboring North Ossetia. The correspondent was sent to Beslan. Her report

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from there I remember a characteristic detail: behind Simonyan's back stood a member of the film crew, holding a bulletproof vest (why it, like the helmet, was not worn by the journalist herself is unclear)724. It was Simonyan who then announced to the whole country the number of hostages in the seized school, deliberately underestimated by the authorities - "300-400". We have already told

They talked about the grave consequences these words had, which were heard not only by the terrified country, but also by the terrorists who were holding over a thousand people as human shields. After 2005, Simonyan became a major capital media manager, receiving enviable funding from the state purse thanks to Gromov's patronage. The budget of the media outlets she heads is constantly growing. For example, over the past three years, annual state subsidies to the RT television channel alone have fluctuated between 27 and 30 billion rubles (about $350 million at the average exchange rate for the same period). 725 It's surprising, but the channel, which is aimed at a foreign audience,

Russia Today receives even more money from the budget than those state television companies that work for

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Russian viewer. A line manager at RT—for example, the head of the Russian broadcast information service, Yevgeny Shipilov—earned 1.1 million rubles per month in 2022. That's over $12,000 per month at the average exchange rate for that year. The average salary in Russia at the same time was less than 80,000 rubles, or less than $1,000. But Simonyan's salary, in the thousands,

times higher than the salaries of even her highest-paid subordinates. In the same investigation about Alexey Gromov, we first revealed how state or government-linked private companies signed contracts with Simonyan for advertising services. The Skolkovo Foundation, Aeroflot, Stroygazmontazh, and others paid the Simonyan family hundreds of millions of rubles for... no one really knows what for. Sometimes RT ran stories praising these companies, sometimes Simonyan herself complimented them on social media. And that's it. Hundreds of millions of rubles, in addition to her state salary, flowed into the pocket of Gromov's favorite. With this money, Simonyan, among other things, bought herself a luxurious

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Cadillac Escalade SUV, hired a driver,
and then leased the car to her employer, the state-owned
television channel RT, so that taxpayers would pay her again—

because her own personal car brings her to work and takes her back to her expensive country house. Don't be ashamed of anything —that's Putin's motto.
the yard.

On March 10, 2020, Alexei Navalny also released his investigation into Simonyan's secret income. It was viewed by several million people on YouTube. What followed was a most disgusting development. Less than a week later, Simonyan, out of the blue, announced on social media that she had been pregnant for about a month . This left many perplexed—why would she write to a million-strong audience about a pregnancy that was definitely no more than four weeks along? Even her acquaintances from Kremlin-linked structures, with whom the authors of this book spoke at the time, were surprised. The solution to her strange behavior emerged a few days later: just as out of the blue, Simonyan announced to millions of social media readers that she had suffered a miscarriage.

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dysh729. Kremlin-linked journalists and bloggers (and later Simonyan herself) immediately blamed the incident on “harassment” by Navalny730 . We don’t know what actually happened then with the country’s most famous propagandist, but, based on our own experience and echoing

Based on numerous testimonies from her acquaintances, we can say: Simonyan is an absolutely shameless and cynical person, capable of lying about everything, including her own family. When we wrote an investigation into her earnings a year before Navalny, Simonyan begged us not to reveal her sister Alisa's government contracting scheme. "This is my younger sister and her personal business, why are you bothering her," Simonyan wrote to us, even though it was obvious from the start that her relative was nothing more than a figurehead for multimillion-dollar contracts.

Simonyan and her family continue to play a vital role in the functioning of the state propaganda machine. Judging by the steady increase in government funding for their activities, during the war, the demand for Simonyan's services was only slightly less than for the products of the

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The same goes for Gromov—there's little chance he'll leave his comfortable office on Staraya Square before Putin leaves his in the Kremlin. The practice of handing over important media outlets to loyal and obedient businessmen has also apparently been recognized as a success—Usmanov, Berezkin, and others still exert a detrimental influence on their editorial boards, even as they try to prove their independence from the Boss and their innocence in foreign courts. Editors of censored publications like Kommersant, even those who left their positions long ago, are still embarrassed to recall painful episodes from their careers, just as victims of violence are afraid to recall their trauma.

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3. The Taboo of All Taboos

How Putin distorted his own biography
and no one noticed

In late autumn 2014, several journalists
The RBC news agency—the editorial staff then headed by Roman Badanin, one of the authors of this book—was in a state of extreme agitation. Talking to sources and digging through documents, we uncovered a sensational story: Putin's youngest daughter, Katerina, about whom there had been no public information since her early childhood, was heading a multi-billion-dollar project to redevelop the grounds of Moscow University on Sparrow Hills. Sensational

The significance was not only that, as we found out, Russians obediently invested in the project.
oligarchs, but also in the fact that Putin's daughter lived incognito, under the name Katerina Tikhonova. (Her fictitious surname most likely comes from the patronymic of Ekaterina Shkrebneva, her maternal grandmother. Likewise, the surname of Putin's younger heirs - Ivan and Vladimir, the sons of Alina Kabaeva - apparently comes from the patronymic

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(The honor of their paternal grandfather, Vladimir Spiridonovich Putin.) The whole plot seemed even more suspicious: an unknown girl, with no experience or background, was managing a huge construction project, in which almost all of Russia's wealthy considered it their duty to participate. At some point, we had everything except the final touch: someone close to the president had to confirm our hypothesis, to say that Tikhonova was Putina. This turned out to be an impossible task. First, we went to a confidential, off-the-record conversation with one of the deputy prime ministers in the government, who had known Putin for many years. His expression changed and he could only say one thing: "I think you need to talk to Dima." The person in question was Dmitry Peskov, Putin's press secretary and one of the main characters in this part. He, too, didn't confirm anything, only rolled his slightly bulging eyes more actively than usual. To his credit, Peskov made no attempt to interfere with our work. I still recall the subsequent story with a mixture of pride and bitterness. RBC's management, including the owner's representative (at the time, it was billionaire Mikhail Pro-

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Khorov, the last media mogul of those who owned a media outlet by their own whim, not by order of the Kremlin), its top managers and lawyers, gathered for a final meeting. Should we call Katerina Tikhonova Putin's daughter? Do we have the right to do so, and aren't we afraid of the vague, but certainly dire, consequences? We had no official confirmation, we didn't have Tikhonova's documents, but we were 99 percent certain.

that she was the president's daughter and no less corrupt than her father. Self-censorship won. Fearing that the Kremlin's wrath would destroy the entire editorial board, which had just been assembled from the country's best professionals, we capitulated to the owner's pressure. Self-interest, though not personal, and fear. In the end, we did not use Tikhonova's real name: I personally deleted the last two ab-

the text where the reader was offered a solution -
Who was this mysterious stranger who received a ton of money for a major construction project?731 Although the context of the narrative immediately completed the rest for us. In the following days, bloggers732 and foreign journalists733, following the trail, revealed Tikhonova's real name.

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Without realizing it, we encountered the most important taboo in Russian journalism in those days. Not only did we encounter it, but, to our present shame, we submitted to it (in the entire history of RBC, this was the only instance of pressure on the editorial board to which we succumbed).

The taboo is: "Not a word about personal matters." This We heard this maxim many times in the following years—to our considerable surprise, it turned out that most Kremlin-dependent editorial boards had been following this rule for many years. “We don’t write about Putin’s family,” “people’s personal lives don’t interest us,” “it’s not corruption, there’s nothing to report on”—these were more or less accurate quotes from several editors of major Moscow publications with whom we spoke. Having emerged at the beginning of Putin’s reign, this taboo grew to absolutely Rabelaisian proportions in the following years, absorbing almost all information about the president’s life outside the Kremlin office, and along with it, the lives of anyone connected with him in any way. When journalist Oleg Blotsky wrote one of the first biographies of the Russian ruler, his

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They asked that nothing be said about Putin's daughters. However, the girls themselves weren't hidden from reporters at the time—they were nearby when biographers spoke with their parents. A former official who knew Putin explained the origins of this ban this way: "The Chechen War was going on."734 Indeed, security played a role in the emergence of the taboo. Five years before Putin came to power, the stepson of Grigory Yavlinsky, one of the country's most famous politicians, a State Duma deputy, and the leader of the liberal Yabloko party, was attacked in a Moscow State University dormitory. The circumstances of that incident remain unclear, except for those Yavlinsky himself deemed it appropriate to disclose.735 Apparently, there was an attempt to kidnap 23-year-old Mikhail Yavlinsky: the young man's fingers were cut off or severely damaged, and a letter was sent to his stepfather (according to one version, the envelope also contained his stepson's bloody flesh) demanding certain concessions from the politician. It is significant that no official documents have survived in such a high-profile case—most likely because Yavlinsky preferred to resolve matters with the kidnappers without going through the law.

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Security agencies. Either he didn't trust their professionalism, or the bandits' demands were too sensitive. In other words, the leader of the parliamentary party, a man who had placed fourth in the presidential election, could easily lose his child in broad daylight and be forced to comply with criminals. So, in 2000, Putin had every right to worry about his family's safety.

The thing is, however, that the “ban on the personal” very quickly took on a full-fledged life of its own—under the cover of this taboo, entire editorial offices were disbanded (as in the case of the newspaper “Moscow Correspondent,” which was the first to write about the affair between Vladimir Putin and Alina Kabaeva), literary works were expunged, and film distribution was censored.

Russian rulers have always considered cinema an expressive medium, especially important in terms of the control it requires. Especially if the film is about the ruler himself. In 2002, when Russia was experiencing its first euphoric infatuation with Putin, a full-length feature film, "A Kiss Not for

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"press." The film had a budget that was average for the time, but it was still enough to attract stars (Andrei Panin, Alexander Belyavsky, and others) and film in several locations, including Dresden. From the name of this city, you've probably already guessed that the film was about Putin, his official wife Lyudmila, and their romance, which survives—relatively successfully—the test of politics. Almost no one reading this has probably seen the film: it was never released, sitting on shelves for five years. In 2008, the Khudozhestvenny Cinema held a premiere, not with the intention of releasing it belatedly, but only so it could be sold on DVD.

While working on the script, the filmmakers clearly read all the biographies of Putin that had been published by that time, including the already tacitly banned books by Irene Pitch and Oleg Blotsky. This was also indicated by the protagonist's last name—

Platov: You remember that this was Putin's pseudonym in intelligence. This nickname was first mentioned by Putin's colleague from intelligence school in the book "From the First" "of the face."

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But the screenwriters chose to ignore the worst part of these biographies. Their Putin doesn't cheat, doesn't abuse his wife, and is just a little late for everything, including his first press conference abroad, at which his wife had to take the microphone. Overall, the film was completely vegetarian, a melodrama based on political material. But even this turned out to be too much. One of the screenwriters (who was also the film's producer) also served as vice-governor of the Tula region. He was clearly informed that the film would not be released. What didn't

Did the Kremlin like it? "It's a piece of crap, not a movie!" laughs a man who worked in the presidential administration at the time.736 The film more or less accurately recreates the main stages of Vladimir and Lyudmila's life together - the serious accident that Putin's wife experienced in the 90s, her husband's constant absences, as they say, for work, the fire at their dacha in the Ozero cooperative. There are also fictitious details, as they say, for dramatization - for example, two unsuccessful assassination attempts on Platov-Putin. The leitmotif of the film is that the wife suffers from her husband's constant busyness and wants him to spend more time with her.

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I spent time with her, not at work. In short, it was impossible to portray Putin and his wife as ordinary people with their own problems and desires. "Besides, Putin was played by a drunkard," recalled a former Kremlin official, referring to the now-deceased actor Andrei Panin, who indeed had problems.

with alcohol.

Novaya Gazeta is a renowned Russian newspaper where many of the positive figures from previous chapters worked, such as Yuri Shchekochikhin and Anna Politkovskaya. The newspaper traditionally wasn't afraid to tackle controversial topics, writing particularly extensively about human rights violations in Chechnya, for which its editor-in-chief, Dmitry Muratov, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021. The "taboo on the personal" couldn't escape such a renowned publication. Soon after Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, the newspaper, which had been published since the 1990s, ran into financial problems (its economic model was unprofitable, and it was supported by monthly subsidies from businessman Alexander Lebedev, who was forced to abandon this practice). The newspaper faced a choice: change.

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model, cut staff, abandon the print version and, possibly, the historic office in the very center of Moscow - or look for a new sponsor.

This is how Sergei Chemezov, one of Putin's closest friends from their KGB days, entered the life of Novaya Gazeta. We mentioned Chemezov above—under President Putin, he avoided conflicts with other dignitaries and has headed all arms production in Russia for two decades. The newspaper's financing scheme was opaque: the money for reporters' salaries came from a supposedly private player, billionaire Sergei Adonyev. Everyone in the editorial office, however, knew that Chemezov was behind it. According to a former employee, the new investor established only two rules: "no personal writing" about Putin and advance warning if the publication concerned Chemezov himself. In practice, of course, the taboo grew like "everlasting bread." In 2016, Novaya Gazeta did not publish an article written by a newspaper employee about the financial connection between Kabaeva and Putin (it was published by the consortium of investigative journalists OCCRP738 and picked up

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Reuters739). In 2019, two articles devoted to the wealth and connections of Chemezov himself were not published.740 A year earlier, in February 2018,

the country

A scandal dubbed "Rybkagate" by the press erupted. Opposition figure Alexei Navalny published another online investigation — this time about oligarch Oleg Deripaska and Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Prikhodko (he was the one who had previously harassed a Kremlin pool journalist). Deripaska and Prikhodko used the services of an escort nicknamed Nastya Rybka (real name—Anastasia Vashukevich), and the official did so at the oligarch's expense, thereby violating not only moral norms but also the law. Un-

Despite the fact that everyone was talking about the investigation, the Russian media, already completely suppressed by the Kremlin, did not write a single line about it. Newspapers only began to react when Deripaska responded to the accusations and filed a lawsuit against the publication (he, of course, won the case, because the courts were subordinated to the authorities much earlier than the press). Novaya Gazeta then published a telling column about "Fishgate" - in it, it was stated

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Navalny's investigation was expected to be "weak "742. The story about Rybka also fell victim to the "taboo on the personal," although it was not about marital infidelity at all, and certainly not Putin's.

In the new realities, it was natural that earlier
The biographies of Putin, in which he appears as a more or less ordinary person, were eventually shelved. Publishers refused

Books by Irene Pitch and Oleg Blotsky were banned from publication, and stores were banned from selling them. This ban was enforced by Vladimir Grigoriev, Alexei Gromov's close friend and subordinate, the Kremlin's book publishing supervisor. Blotsky tried to fight for his book: for example, they tried to republish it with money from a private investor, the Union of Armenians of Russia (we don't know what motivated this organization). But the huge print run simply didn't reach the shelves, making Blotsky's books a rare find. Even "First Person" fell victim to censorship, albeit in a more lenient form. During Putin's first terms, the text of this biography was posted directly on the official website of the Russian head of state. And then it disappeared without a trace. One

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One of the book's co-authors, Natalia Gevorkyan, told us about this743, and suggested that the text was hidden because of numerous references to Sergei Roldugin, a presidential figurehead whose offshore companies helped journalists follow the trail of Putin's money in 2016.

But, having erased some biographies from public memory, they had to be replaced by others. Thus, a change in genre also occurred. If books like the one written by officer Oleg Blotsky resembled a chivalric romance, then modern ones are "lives of a saint." Putin's new hagiography—

These are primarily two major documentaries shown on Russian television in 2015 and 2018, respectively. The release dates indicate that each film served a specific propaganda purpose. The first, titled "President," was filmed by Vladimir Solovyov following the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the war in Donbas, when Russia fell under international sanctions. The film aimed to demonstrate that Putin's actions in Ukraine were based on deep intent and genuine concern for the Russian state. The second film —

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Andrey Kondrashov's "Putin" was timed to coincide with the Russian presidential election in March 2018. It began airing two days after the vote: there was no point in airing it earlier, as campaigning in a country where elections can be easily rigged is an unnecessary luxury. Instead, on March 21 and 22, 2018, Russians were treated to over two hours of choice lies and sycophancy, the man they had already elected.

Kondrashov is a new type of propagandist, one that emerged during the final years of President Putin's presidency. Wit, as well as intelligence, and the literary and directorial talents that were abundant among TV killers of the past, are no longer required. Most colleagues746 describe Kondrashov as a not very gifted but highly efficient careerist with views close to Putin's propaganda. Kondrashov grew up in Ka-

Zakhstan, first Soviet, then independent.

In the early 1990s, the young journalist worked as a freelancer for Russian television from Almaty. One day, during a live broadcast, Kondrashov became involved in a political dispute.

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After which he urgently needed to move to Moscow. Step by step, lie by lie, Kondrashov built his career in Russia—he anchored evening newscasts on state television and worked as a political commentator—but success finally turned his face after 2012, when Putin devised and implemented the concept of "spiritual bonds." Since then, Kondrashov has released documentaries once a year, or even more frequently, dedicated to various aspects of Putin's life or something important to the president. Judge for yourself: the film "Putin" was preceded and followed by films with titles like "Scarlet Sails" (about the graduation ball in St. Petersburg, which Putin restored and where the president and his closest circle attend every summer)748, "Valaam" (about Putin's favorite monastery, where he probably hid from showdowns in the 90s)749, "Crimea. The Path to the Homeland"750 (it's clear what it's about) or "War for Memory" (about the correct, in the Kremlin's opinion, interpretation of World War II)751. That is, literally a conveyor belt of "Putiniana." From the mise-en-scènes of some films, it is clear that interviews with the protagonists

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Interviews with Putin (including those with Putin) were recorded once for several films together. In terms of content, none of Kondrashov's films are masterpieces, even by the standards of commissioned panegyrics. It's unlikely there's another biopic that so repeatedly shows framed portraits of the protagonist, hanging behind the interviewees. Kondrashov himself is terrible even in his masculine form: the question "What should underlie our greatness?" which he addressed to Putin752 gives an idea of his talent as a sycophant. But why such a bountiful stream of less-than-perfect propaganda? The answer will be very revealing.

Kondrashov, although he was not a shining journalist, talents, he turned out to be quite adroit in business matters. While working as the face of a state television channel, he spent years involved in all sorts of side businesses in at least 13 companies, in which he was listed as the owner of significant shares. The companies specialized in everything: trading, creating advertising content, and so on. But the funniest thing is something else—Con-

Drashov has learned to steal money using Putin's name. The company is connected to the journalist.

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The Center for Political Strategies and the Nashe Kino Association are paid by PR campaign clients—large state-owned enterprises like Russian Railways or Rosselkhozbank. For what? To have a story—or, better yet, a film—about, say, a thriving fish market aired on the state-owned VGTRK television channel. In other words, a state-owned company pays a private firm to receive praise on state-owned television. Incidentally, fishing is not a fictitious example. In early 2022, Rosselkhozbank decided to boast about its successes in the fishing industry at state expense. Within a couple of months, nearly 40 million rubles were transferred to a company linked to Kondrashov. (For those who love big numbers, don't worry. In another case, Kondrashov's legal entity received almost 300 million from Russian Railways.) And already on July 17, the VGTRK, where Kondrashov was working as the first deputy director at the time, aired a film about fish, "Putin on"753. Yes, Kondrashov has *a literal* fixation on Putin. For

For a short time he contributed to three paintings with the letters “put” in their titles: “Putin,” “The Path,”

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"Putin's on." Try searching for the film "Putin's on" online—almost the entire search results will be filled with hits about Putin. It turns out the state paid Kondrashov, out of citizens' pockets, for a fish ad, and he even managed to glorify Putin here. Never before has a biographer of a Russian

The president did not feel his hero so subtly.

The replacement of Putin's real biographies with fictional ones created by sycophants and corrupt officials had one important practical consequence. *Any* lie was legitimized. Lying is now permissible not only about, say, the West's treachery or corruption. Now it's commonplace to lie even about one's own parents. The episodes we will describe below shocked us. We have already mentioned the name of Andrei Kolesnikov—he was one of the co-authors of the first Kremlin-sanctioned biography of Putin, the book "First Person." That book launched Kolesnikov's great career. For a quarter of a century now, he has been one of Putin's main chroniclers—his reports on the president's life and deeds appear time after time in the daily newspaper Kommersant. Somewhat verbose, with harmless satirical sketches...

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These texts, apparently, are favored by the Tsar and his retinue. "A heavy sigh echoed through the Kremlin's St. Andrew's Hall. It was Vladimir Putin sighing into the microphone," Kolesnikov concluded his 2015 report from an event he hadn't attended. He and the president have become so skilled at paired hypocrisy that Kolesnikov, for example, can describe a meeting involving Putin simply by seeing it on television (he naturally doesn't admit to this in the article). The book "First Person" has fallen into disgrace, but its co-author is unlikely to be upset. Over the past 25 years, Kolesnikov (now solo) has authored several new volumes of Putiniana—books with titles like "Putin Saw Me!" contain no new facts or valuable conclusions, but are freely available in Russia. The matter hasn't stopped at books. Kolesnikov launched the magazine "Russian Pioneer," where he regularly published columns by various Putin officials. In the spring of 2015, the president himself took up the pen—he, according to Kolesnikov, wrote a column for "Russian Pioneer" titled "Life is such a simple and cruel thing."755 It's an interesting read—in the text, Putin admitted for the first time that his father served in the...

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water fleet in Sevastopol (we talked about this above). But Putin also left other sketches from the lives of his parents there. Among other things, Putin writes about his mother and father: "She survived. And she lived until 1999. And he died at the end of 1998-
"go." If you flip through our book backwards, you'll easily find the passage about Putin's parents. Among other things, it says that the president's father died in August 1999, and his mother about a year earlier (Putin himself mentioned these dates in Blotsky's 2001 book).

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Родителям ничего этого не сообщили. Ну, тогда, видимо, было не до этого.

Так что все, что родители рассказывали о войне, было правдой. Ни одного слова не придумали. Ни одного дня не передвинули. И про брата. И про соседа. И про немца — командира группы. Все один в один. И все это позже невероятным образом подтверждалось.

А отец, когда ребенка забрали и мама осталась одна, а ему разрешили ходить, встал на костыли и пошел домой. Когда подошел к дому, то увидел, что санитары выносят из подъезда трупы. И увидел маму. Подошел, и ему показалось, что она дышит. И он санитарам говорит: «Она же еще живая!» — «По дороге дойдет, — говорят ему санитары. — Уже не выживет». Он рассказывал, что набросился на них с костылями и заставил поднять ее назад, в квартиру. Они ему сказали: «Ну, как скажешь, так и сделаем, но знай, что мы больше сюда не приедем еще две-три четыре недели. Сам будешь разбираться тогда». И он ее выходил. Она осталась жива. И дожила до 1999 года. А он умер в конце 1998-го.

После снятия блокады они переехали на родину их родителей, в Тверскую губернию, и до конца войны жили там. Семья у отца была довольно большой. У него же было шесть братьев, и пятеро погибли. Это катастрофа для семьи. И у мамы погибли родные. И я оказался поздним ребенком. Она родила меня в 41 год.

И не было же семьи, где бы кто-то не погиб. И, конечно, горе, беда, трагедия. Но у них не было ненависти к врагу, вот что удивительно. Я до сих пор ни могу, честно говоря, этого до конца понять. Мама вообще была у меня человек очень мягкий, добрый... И она говорила: «Ну какая в этих солдатах может быть ненависть? Они простые люди и тоже погибали на войне». Это поразительно. Мы воспитывались на советских книгах, фильмах... И ненавидели. А вот у нее этого почему-то совсем не было. И ее слова я очень хорошо запомнил: «Ну что с них взять? Они такие же работяги, как и мы. Просто их гнали на фронт».

Вот эти слова я помню с детства.

Russian Pioneer Magazine, May 2015

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The dates of Putin's parents' deaths have never been a secret. Here's a photograph of their tombstone at the Serafimovskoye Cemetery in St. Petersburg. The media remembered the tombstone in 2023, when an ordinary St. Petersburg woman received a two-year suspended sentence simply for leaving a note on the Putins' grave: "Take him home with you," referring to the Russian president.

Nonexyst/ Wikipedia

It turns out that in one of his rarest articles, Putin not only got the dates of his own parents' deaths wrong, but even mixed up the order in which he laid them to rest. Do you believe someone can forget which parent died first?

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This oddity can perhaps be explained only by one thing: Putin didn't write this column; it was drafted for him by Kolesnikov himself or an unnamed clerk in the Kremlin. Confusion happens, it happens. But it's worth reading further. "Putin"

writes: *"[My father] got up on crutches and walked home [from the hospital in besieged Leningrad]. When he got to the house, he saw orderlies carrying corpses out of the entrance. And then he saw my mother. He approached, and it seemed to him that she was breathing. And he said to the orderlies: 'She's still alive!' 'She'll get there on the way,' the orderlies told him. 'She won't survive.' He said that he attacked them with his crutches and forced them to lift her back into the apartment." They told him: "Well, we'll do whatever you say, but know that we won't be coming here again for another two, three, or four weeks. You'll figure it out yourself then." And he nursed her back to health.*

You'll agree, it's a poignant scene—a man saves his wife from certain death in a city where death is everywhere. To add credibility to this episode, the columnist immediately writes: *"So everything my parents told me about the war was true. They didn't make up a single word."*

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The thing is that the same two, Putin and Kolesnikov, wrote in the book “In the First Person” in 2000
Something

completely different: *"One day, my mother lost consciousness from hunger; they thought she had died, and they even put her with the dead. It's a good thing my mother came to in time and started moaning. Miraculously, she survived. She spent the entire siege in Leningrad. She was taken away when the danger had already passed."*

- Where was your father?

— My father was fighting at that time.

Wait, my father was either fighting or in the Leningrad hospital, where he came from to save his wife from the cruel orderlies with the help of crutches and a lot of swearing. What changed over time?
What about the years that passed between these two works by Putin and Kolesnikov? How could the Russian president have known such a vivid detail as a miraculous rescue from a pile of lifeless bodies? The elder Putins were already dead, and there were no eyewitnesses left. Who, how, and when told him this? Why, finally, does Putin say that his mother lived in Leningrad "throughout the entire siege," if the archives indicate that she was evacuated from the encircled city?

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In July 1942? The city's siege was only fully lifted at the end of January 1944, and the first breakthrough of the encirclement didn't occur until early 1943. *Is Putin really lying even about such things?*

Yes, that's right. Sometimes there were political reasons for the lies. For example, the column about the exploits of Putin's father was published a year after the "return of Crimea," when heroic examples from the past were needed. Putin first whispered the story of rescuing his mother from under a pile of corpses to Hillary Clinton in 2012 during the APEC summit in Vladivostok—apparently he wanted to add drama to demonstrate the heroism of the Soviet people.

But sometimes Putin—even about purely personal matters—lie and fantasize without any apparent reason. Automatically, as they say. In early 2024, the Russian tsar met with carefully selected Russian families—the meeting was dedicated to the same “traditional values.” The guests asked Putin about any child-rearing secrets he could share. He replied that the most important thing is the personal example of parents, and recalled his father: “In...

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"First of all, I want to emphasize this, I never saw my father drunk. In fact, that never happened. I won't even mention my mother. I never heard him utter a single swear word. Not at all. Well, I won't even mention my mother either."757 Perhaps young Volodya was indeed protected from violence and foul language in the family, but readers should also remember that Putin's mother was one-eyed from a young age, because the future Russian leader's father gouged out her other eye with a pitchfork in a rage.758

People lie, make things up, fantasize, and simply make mistakes, relying on unreliable memories. This happens to everyone, including rulers. This happens not only in Russia. But in Russia

Lies and fabrications replaced truth and history. Real biographies were banned and erased from memory, the press was destroyed. Since then, it's been possible to lie about anything.

* * *

Our investigation into Katerina Putina (Tikhonova), albeit with a significant gap, was published

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played a significant role in the fate of both the authors of this book and the entire Russian media market.

After some time, we learned the extent of the Kremlin's irritation. A couple of months after the incident with Putin's daughter, hackers broke into and published the email correspondence of a mid-level Kremlin clerk named Timur Prokopenko (he has already been mentioned in this book as a person involved in defamation and bribery of journalists). 759 From it, we learned that Prokopenko, on the instructions of his superiors—for example, Gromov—was in constant contact with the management of the media holding company where we worked. To the credit of Mikhail Prokhorov's managers, not a single attempt to influence our editorial policy penetrated the barrier separating the owner from the editorial staff. It was therefore surprising to read the heated emotions raging in the Kremlin regarding our work. Here, for example, is the supposed Gromov giving instructions to the supposed Prokopenko: "RBC made a splash today with an article about the military in Ukraine. We need your educational talk. We've been eating fish soup..."

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(Usually, officials don't shy away from swearing when communicating with each other, but here, for some reason, Gromov used a euphemism.) Prokopenko immediately wrote a short message to the director of RBC, calling our investigation "hell." The text was of exceptional importance—we were the first to describe the presence of career Russian military personnel in Donbas, a sovereign Ukrainian territory. I, Roman Badanin, as the editor of that investigation, assert that the Kremlin's wrath was delayed in transit, never reaching the editorial office, and therefore had no impact on our work. Apparently, that's why the anger on the other end of the line was building. Some time later, we also published an investigation about Putin's son-in-law—Katerina Tikhonova's then-common-law husband, Kirill Shamalov. One Sunday evening in the spring of 2016, Russia's main propaganda television show, the "Vesti Nedeli" program with Dmitry Kiselev, seemingly out of the blue showed the front page of the RBC newspaper. 762 That issue contained an article763 devoted to the aforementioned "Panama Papers," an international investigation that involved Vladimir Putin and Sergei Roldugin. The gist of the pro-

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The narrative was this: the West is groundlessly attacking our national leader, and some people inside Russia, like independent journalists, are aiding this shameful endeavor. It was a "black mark." A short time later, the Ministry of Internal Affairs launched an investigation, and later opened a criminal case against RBC for some (probably fictitious) economic crime committed long before the events described, but which had now suddenly attracted the attention of the authorities . 764 The editorial office was under unprecedented threat. Thus, I, Roman Badanin, found myself receiving a reception from Peskov for the second time in a short period of time. Late one April evening in 2016, three RBC editors, including me, arrived at the Kremlin for an informal conversation with Putin's press secretary. The main question we immediately asked was: what kind of outcome should we prepare our several hundred employees—journalists from the website, newspaper, magazine, and television channel—for? Peskov was very vague in his answer, but certain words and his tone made it clear: the decision on RBC's fate had already been made; Prokhorov would either have to sell the asset to a Kremlin-loyal businessman or forcefully persuade...

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To harass the editorial staff, whose investigations had infuriated the authorities. This pessimistic forecast came true, even more so. On April 14, the so-called "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin" aired—a propaganda television show during which the president spends several hours answering carefully selected and therefore innocuous questions. While Putin sat in the studio, dozens of law enforcement officers raided the offices of all of Prokhorov's companies—except RBC itself—and conducted searches. Even years later, it remains unclear what the security forces were investigating. What is clear is that it was a highly effective intimidation measure. Anyone familiar with the history of Russian media could easily draw a chain of parallels: Gusinsky, Berezovsky, Prokhorov. The first two came to a bad end because the media outlets they owned infuriated the Kremlin. Prokhorov still had a chance to avoid the most unpleasant consequences. Immediately after the long May holidays, the owner decided for the first time to rudely interfere with the editorial policy of his media outlet—

He expressed dissatisfaction with the article about the oyster farms near Putin's palace near Gelendzhik.

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com765 (we already mentioned this story above). As a result, the entire editorial management, including Roman Badanin, and later a significant number of journalists, including Mikhail Rubin, resigned in protest. Prokhorov recognized the threat immediately: after our departure, he appointed compliant journalists who had already been through the school of fear and self-interest to run RBC. A year later, Mikhail Prokhorov quietly sold his media empire to Grigory Berezkin, a businessman exceptionally loyal to the authorities. The criminal cases against Prokhorov's people were safely forgotten, but the businessman, to be on the safe side, hastily got rid of almost all of his Russian assets. Even the billionaire physically spent most of his time away from his homeland from that point on. He met the outbreak of the war with Ukraine in Turkey, recalls his acquaintance766 . Soon, the entrepreneur received a call from the Kremlin with an important message: if he wanted to preserve his remaining business in the country, he must return to Russia. The same source continues that many, if not all, businessmen living abroad received such a demand at the same time. Prokhorov again obeyed and,

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While traveling, he asked Putin for an audience to resolve his problems. He waited at least six months for an audience, but it never came. He then sold the rest of his business and went abroad again.

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4. King of Beasts

When Putin got fed up with everything

You're probably wondering: why did journalists go to Dmitry Peskov, as if to a fortune teller, to learn their fates? And why him, specifically? To answer this, a biographical digression is required.

Peskov deserves a separate story for two important reasons.767 First, unlike Gromov, he is practically uninvolved in censorship, but at the same time, he is even more deeply mired in another sin than all the other Kremlin clerks: he is the chief lie-maker. It is from the head of state's press secretary that all comments to the press, both formal and substantive, emanate. Therefore, when the Kremlin wants to lie, which happens very often, this desire is invariably verbalized in Peskov's speech apparatus. The second reason Peskov deserves a separate opus is

He is one of the extremely rare Putin officers whose biography does not resemble the rotation of a gear in a bureaucratic machine, but on the contrary, resembles a fascinating *human life* in its own way.

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life. Peskov was born in 1967 into a young and very privileged family. His father, a native of the provincial town of Mukachevo in Western Ukraine, was just 19 years old when his son was born, having entered the Institute of Oriental Languages (soon to be renamed the Institute of Asia and Africa, or ISA). ISA is a forge not only

Not only diplomats, but also intelligence officers: it trained specialists who were then sent to the hot fronts of the Cold War—the Middle East and the so-called "people's democracies" in Asia and Africa. A friend of the Peskov family is certain that Dmitry's father was precisely one of those ISAA graduates who advanced through the intelligence services. His career supports this theory: for many years, Peskov Sr. worked in the Middle East under the umbrella of so-called "friendship societies" and "solidarity organizations." Such institutions, whose names usually meant nothing, were created in abundance in the USSR to serve as cover for intelligence agents, including illegal ones. Peskov's father was actually a diplomat—ambassador first to Pakistan, then to Oman.

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became so only when his son made a big career under Putin.

Dmitry Peskov
kremlin.ru

Peskov doesn't talk about his mother. If you read the biography of Putin's press secretary as reported by Russian state news agencies, such as TASS768, it would seem as if Peskov was born by his father, because there's not a word about his mother. And she—her name was Nadezhda Zevina—was a person with a very interesting pedigree.

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Noah. Peskov's mother came from the very elite.
Soviet society, she was, pardon the pun, a red-blooded, blue-blooded person. Nadezhda's grandfather, Yakov
Zevin, a Jew originally from Belarus, joined the Bolshevik Party at the beginning of the 20th century. In the revolutionary year of 1917, Zevin found himself in Baku, where he joined the local Bolshevik government, known in history as the Baku Commune. Twenty-six commissars from this government

government officials, including Zevin, were shot
enemies of the Reds in September 1918. From that moment on, the names of the fallen Baku revolutionaries were included in the official martyrology of the Soviet
authorities—towns, streets, and factories were named after commissars. But Yakov Zevin's widow, Nadezhda, did not die—she and her children, including Vladimir, the future grandfather

Dmitry Peskov was taken to Moscow. To tell the truth
speaking, Nadezhda Drobinskaya (Zevina) was among Bolsheviks, a figure at least equal to her husband, if not more prominent. She, too, had been a party member since the beginning of the century, had survived trials and exile, and was responsible for issues in the same Baku Commune.
education. After the death of her husband, Vladimir personally

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Lenin provided Peskov's great-grandmother with housing in Moscow. Zevin's widow became a family friend of the founder of the Soviet state and worked
side by side with Nadezhda Krupskaya, his wife and later
Lenin's widow, in the People's Commissariat of Education. At that time, the ancestors Peskov and Putin may well have known each other. As we already mentioned, the president's grandfather, Spiridon
was a cook under Lenin and Krupskaya, worked at
their dachas near Moscow. Peskov's great-grandmother also often spent time there. Under Joseph Stalin, Nadezhda Zevina was a delegate to the All-Union
congresses of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), and was also involved in “purges” of the party ranks, as the repressions against them were called then opponents of the Soviet leader. Already in old age
At the age of 18, Zevin wrote memoirs about Lenin's family while working at his museum in Moscow. Her son, that is,
Dmitry Peskov's grandfather also became a prominent figure in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—among other things, he served as deputy director of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, a completely pointless, but very important institution in Soviet times. When Vladimir
a daughter was born, she was named Nadezhda - perhaps in honor of her grandmother (at that time she was not yet old) woman), or in memory of Krupskaya (besides

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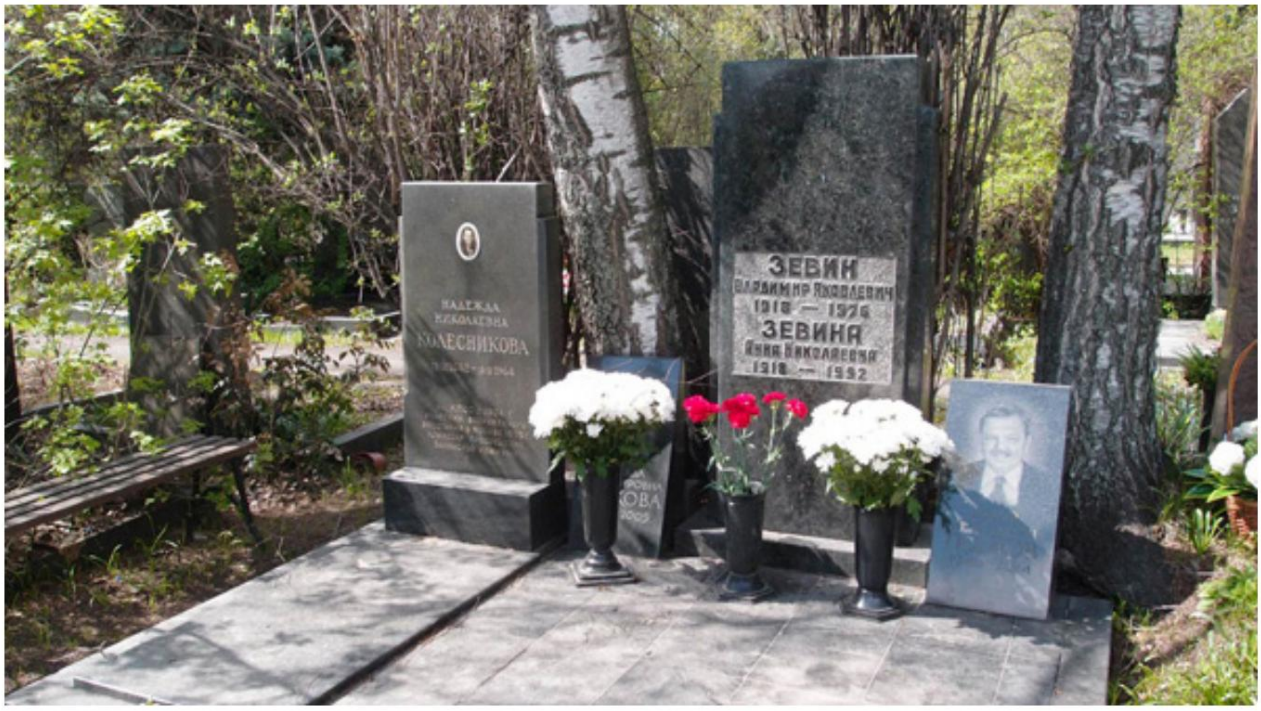
(she had already passed away at that time). Nadezhda Peskova, mother Putin's press secretary may also have worked in the intelligence services - there are no mentions of her employment anywhere in the databases, and this often indicates that a person's career was connected with the security agencies. Family

Peskov lived in a privileged departmental house on Presnya - such houses made of fireproof brick are popularly called "Central Committee houses".
The neighbors were employees of the KGB and foreign trade (in the USSR this is almost the same thing).



The Peskov family necropolis at the Novodevichy Cemetery in Moscow

novodevichiynecropol.narod.ru

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Dmitry Peskov, like his father, graduated from the Institute of Asian and Asian Studies, where he specialized in Turkey. He went there as a rank-and-file employee of the Soviet Embassy in 1990. But he didn't go alone. Peskov, like his father, married early and profitably and had children early. This, incidentally, is an important detail, as it testifies to our hero's well-known careerism. The Soviet and Russian Foreign Ministry has always had an unspoken rule: preference for long-term assignments abroad is given to married men and women (particularly because they are considered harder to recruit or compromise). So Peskov was eager to go abroad. But he married none other than the granddaughter of Stalin's favorite, Marshal Semyon Budyonny. The Budyonny family was also privileged; despite their participation in the bloody repressions under Stalin, they retained their prestigious Moscow residence and a dacha on Rublevskoye Highway, where the entire Soviet elite dreamed of settling. Anastasia Budennaya—that was the name of Peskov's wife—gave birth to a son, Nikolai, in 1990. However, it was Anastasia who ultimately nearly ruined her husband's coveted career. During

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During a mission to Ankara, Peskov's wife, also a very young woman, began secretly dating a British citizen who was working there, either diplomatically or on business. Ultimately, Anastasia left him for the Englishman and soon returned to his homeland with little Kolya. It was a scandal. By the standards of Russian diplomacy, such a story could have cost an embassy employee their career, since it implied that a potential adversary was capable of learning state secrets through intimacy. In 1994, Peskov was recalled to Moscow—perhaps because of this incident, or perhaps because his mission was about to expire. Peskov returned home with a mustache—the hair above Putin's press secretary's upper lip would become an easily recognizable feature of his appearance for years to come. As an orientalist who knew Peskov recalled, the mustache probably didn't just appear out of nowhere: Dmitry, like his father, wore a mustache because that's how "serious men should look" in the East. The word "Mustache" would also become Peskov's long-standing nickname among journalists who interacted with him.

table

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Returning to Moscow in 1994, our hero didn't lose his composure and quickly entered into another profitable marriage. His wife was yet another young woman—
Ekaterina Solotsinskaya, the 18-year-old daughter of a prominent diplomat. Peskov, then 23, began courting the blonde, then underage girl while still married. Katya Solotsinskaya lived with her parents in Ankara at the same time as Peskov and Budyonnaya's marriage was falling apart. As Ekaterina later recalled, a young embassy clerk had been paying her attentions while still in school, but he proposed marriage in Moscow, when she had reached her 18th birthday. The marriage had the advantage of Katya's father, Vladimir Solotsinsky, being a prominent figure in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and one of the leading experts on Turkey. By becoming related to him, Peskov compensated for the career setback caused by the divorce. Moreover, it was Katya's father who, in November 1999, recommended his son-in-law as a personal interpreter for Russian President Boris Yeltsin during the latter's only visit to Turkey. It was an important trip for Yeltsin, who was already retiring. In Istanbul, where the summit was taking place at the time,

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The OSCE, the Russian leader clashed with Western leaders over Chechnya—his successor, Vladimir Putin, was already waging war in the republic. At this crucial moment, a young, red-mustached interpreter found himself at the old tsar's side. This couldn't go unnoticed—Peskov was immediately recommended to the Kremlin brass (the then-ambassador to Turkey, Alexander Lebedev, knew Alexei Gromov from their time together in the former Czechoslovakia). Thus, Peskov became the second person in charge of media affairs in the Kremlin after Gromov.

Putin's image.

Peskov's subsequent career progressed rapidly and steeply: he soon became a figure at court, practically the equal of Gromov, his boss. His personal life was more complicated. Solotsinskaya bore Peskov three children, never held a full-time job, but lived in exceptional wealth, the nature of which can hardly be explained legally. With the proceeds, the young mother of three opened a beauty salon in Moscow, and then a company in France. The official income of the presidential press secretary would not have been nearly enough for all this. And we'll talk about Peskov's unofficial income later.

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However, problems arose in the family. Solotsinskaya later described her "sufferings" in marriage to a glossy magazine: "I remember one moment. It's 2011. I'm thirty-five. I'm sitting in my house on Rublyovka. Three children. An expensive car. My own business. Everyone loves and accepts me. I've achieved everything. I mean achieved—it wasn't handed to me on a silver platter. And I caught myself thinking: 'Is this really it? Am I going to sit like this for the rest of my life?'"770. Eventually, Ekaterina moved to Paris alone, where, again with unknown funds, she acquired her own apartment "with floor-to-ceiling windows" near the Arc de Triomphe. In 2012, the couple officially divorced. The tabloids cited Peskov's secret affair with Olympic figure skating champion, TV star, and socialite Tatyana Navka as the reason for the divorce. This energetic blonde could well have become the heroine of the chapter in which we discussed how women in Putin's Russia often have to build a career. Navka, having spent much of her adult life in the United States, where she trained and worked, returned to her homeland under Putin—then

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Show business was booming in Russia, and it was possible to make a tidy fortune. Having become part of the capital's social scene, Navka began a relationship with a Putin courtier named Vladimir Kozhin . You've met him in the chapters above; he's a former Komsomol leader from Leningrad, and under Putin, a highly professional corrupt official who headed the presidential administration. Kozhin is 16 years older than Navka and looks like a caricatured NEPman, but with a bronze tan. This tan seems to convey to others that Kozhin lives a wealthy life, travels frequently, sails yachts, and relaxes on sun-drenched terraces. Having become a high-ranking official under Putin, Kozhin gave free rein to his individuality. For example, he decided to dress flamboyantly, not like a bureaucrat—fortunately, he now had enough money for a bohemian style. He would sometimes show up to an official event in bright patent leather shoes with gold-tone buckles or a sequined belt, but he especially loved flashy suits. There's one bureaucratic tradition in Putin's Russia that's pointless.

anecdotal: high-ranking officials almost always,
When the president flies on business trips, he

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They greet him and meet him at the government airport. This is a separate room of the government terminal at Vnukovo, which the higher-ups call the "station for two" because it

Only the president and prime minister used it for takeoffs and landings. Officials attend farewells and meetings without any particular purpose; it's just the way it is. Kozhin also never missed an opportunity to pay his respects to Putin. At another farewell ceremony at Vnukovo, the head of the administration once donned a truly outrageous outfit—

An expensive suit with a bright, wide stripe. Based on the words of a Kremlin official who remembers this incident, we imagine Kozhin's two-piece suit as a generic stage outfit for Philip Kirkorov. Kozhin's appearance was jarring to his colleagues, but then the president noticed his subordinate's outfit. "Why are you dressed up like a mattress?" Putin asked with a smile. Kozhin would never allow himself such extravagance again.

willed.

It so happened in Navka's life that one Putin courtier was replaced by another. In 2015, Peskov and Navka officially married. Kozhin

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He didn't grieve for long and soon married a little-known, but attractive singer, 30 years his junior.

Peskov had another child with Navka, bringing his total number of heirs to five. All the younger Peskovs live quite comfortably, including abroad. The older ones—Nikolai and Elizaveta—are already exploiting their father's connections and status as best they can.772 Peskov himself also leads a vibrant social life: horse racing, parties, expensive suits, and much more expensive wristwatches, always new.

This lengthy and largely exclusive biographical digression was necessary for one simple purpose: to give you an idea of Peskov's reputation at Putin's court. Most officials, followed by businessmen, journalists, artists, and interested ordinary citizens, consider the press secretary *the most normal person* in Putin's inner circle. In a sense, this is true: Peskov is an educated, witty bon vivant who has never publicly presented himself as a cannibal and, according to acquaintances, doesn't always agree with his boss's actions.

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The lies the press secretary often allows himself in public comments are dismissed by listeners as the perks of his position: he embarrasses himself publicly so Putin doesn't have to. And let's not forget our hero's distinctive manner of speech, which envelops and soothes even the most jaded reporters. If you watch almost any interview with Peskov, you'll notice that when he speaks, he makes a unique sound—a very quiet wheeze, almost like a whistle, linking his equally quiet phrases. One of his acquaintances probably calls Peskov "The Whistler" for this reason. Or perhaps it's because of those same lies.

In short, at some point, the conviction arose and took hold at the Russian court that Peskov was the ideal person to privately ascertain the Tsar's mood, or perhaps even convey some request. And Peskov learned to monetize his fame. As the president's press secretary, he regularly received questions from other officials about how they could improve their image in the eyes of the head of state. Why not make money from it? Peskov directed

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Those who inquired of their business partners, who founded a chain of PR firms. These specialists created "turnkey reputations"—posting custom articles about their clients' successes online, tirelessly editing their Wikipedia biographies, and ensuring that incriminating information about them was either removed from the internet or didn't appear in the top search results. The main contractor was Fyodor Shcherbakov, a hereditary press secretary, but one below Peskov. His mother once worked with Sergei Shoigu, and he himself was press secretary for Dmitry Kozak, whom we mentioned in the story about the Olympics. Peskov, of course, receives a cut when he brings in new clients, as one of the former top managers of this business tells us. It's all very medieval: the ruler's interpreter (from the tsar's language to the language of press releases) enriches himself through access to the body, knowledge of courtly life, and his ability to lie. However, when we asked about RBC's future, Putin's press secretary answered honestly, albeit pessimistically. Peskov's figure is also suitable for demonstrating a very important evolution of his boss.

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Almost every year, the usually reclusive Putin, as if by magic, becomes accessible to journalists and answers their questions for many hours. This magical séance is called a grand presidential press conference, to which reporters from virtually any media outlet in Russia —from the capital, the provinces, or foreign—can be accredited (usually, more than a thousand journalists are admitted to this event). I, Mikhail Rubin, attended this strange event several times, trying again and again to ask the president a question simply by raising my hand. The effectiveness of this strategy was zero. We won't

We're not going to claim that ordinary reporters are completely deprived of the chance to speak with Putin. No, almost anyone can earn the right to ask a question, but to do so, they'll have to temporarily become a clown. For example, they'd have to draw a poster with a picture Putin likes or a humorous caption.

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In 2016, one journalist decided to attract Putin's attention with a picture of him in a Superman costume.
kremlin.ru

I never wanted to stand out because of this. But in December 2015, the RBC editorial staff, where both authors of this book worked at the time, was fundamentally concerned about getting answers from Putin. There were two reasons. Firstly, that year one of our colleagues was jailed on charges of extremism, and we were trying to draw the attention of the authorities and the public to his fate.774 Secondly, the editorial staff was still feeling uneasy after the investigation into Putin's daughter, of which...

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We were forced to omit her real name. Therefore, we wanted to ask Putin in public: is Katerina Tikhonova his daughter? Therefore, we had to negotiate with Peskov. This time, the conversation with the presidential press secretary fell to Mikhail Rubin. If you've ever watched a major press conference, you've probably noticed that Peskov is initially responsible for choosing the questioners. Let us disabuse the optimists:

The press secretary is not guided by blind chance, he either chooses trusted journalists
Kremlin pool members from whom he does not expect any trickery, or points to those who asked him about it in advance.

I sent my questions in advance to the presidential press service's email address, and at the same time wrote a personal message to Peskov asking him to consider our request. To my surprise, I soon received
One of the press secretary's subordinates called and started a conversation whose meaning I didn't immediately understand: "RBC is a business publication. Aren't you interested in why state-owned companies haven't cut their top managers' pay during the crisis?" I was already starting to think about how to end this conversation as quickly as possible, so that

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They no longer tried to push questions on me that state-run publications could handle without us. But then my interlocutor said pointedly, "And the other questions... I can't stop you from asking them..." Basically, they offered us a deal: we ask the question the Kremlin wants (and, by the way, not at all sycophantic), and in return, they can ask whatever we want. Peskov confirmed this plan in a private message. In the end, everything went exactly according to script: Peskov called me to the microphone and, along with Putin, patiently listened as I, the only one there that day, squeezed three unrelated questions into a single retort. The Tsar was prepared for this. When asked about state-owned companies, he delivered a clearly rehearsed speech about the need to cut government spending. When asked about his daughters, he answered at length without saying anything—he didn't even mention their names. The question about our colleague turned out to be quite revealing. Putin, of course, promised to look into the matter (one of the presidential guards, perhaps the future governor, later took from me the text of the appeal with the details of the criminal case). A year passed, at the same event, someone else

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Goy asked again about the journalist's fate, and Putin promised to pay attention to it. Of course, our colleague served the full sentence.

The orchestrated press conference for thousands of reporters is a vicious genre; it exists nowhere in the world except in caricature despotisms. Early in his reign, Putin, like any populist, flirted with the press. If you recall, we reported on one of his first television interviews—in the winter of 2000, still acting president, he stiffly and memorized his answers to Sergei Dorenko's obsequious questions. As time went on, Putin matured, and the number of recalcitrant journalists gradually dwindled. At one point, it seemed Putin had literally fallen in love with the work of a public politician.

During his first two terms, he was able to engage in lengthy conversations with the press, both openly and otherwise (sometimes he invited journalists to his office for private conversations, but filming and quoting the head of state following the conversation was prohibited). In addition to all sorts of interviews and approaches to the press, the president had three special genres of communication with the country—those provided for in the Constitution.

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the annual address to parliament (it was in it that Putin announced “spiritual bonds” in 2012), that same “big press conference,” and also “direct line,” that is, a session of communication with pre-selected ordinary Russians who called Putin on the phone and made requests via video link. “Before, only I knew that he was bragging,” joked Lyudmila Putina in 2000, after seeing the galleys of the biographical book

“First Person”775. Vladislav Borodulin conducted one of the first interviews with Putin in early 2001. He recalls that the president was clearly interested then - so much so that he tried to win the sympathy of the interviewers (and successfully, Borodulin admits years later)776. But over time, Putin acquired the skill of giving long and insignificant

answers that seem to be a story that doesn't clarify anything his daughters. By

emasculating the quality press, the Kremlin very soon came to an unpleasant conclusion: public conversations with the tsar were becoming less and less interesting to both the country and journalists. For example, television ratings for "direct lines" were declining.

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had been going on for many years.777 During his third presidential term, Putin curtailed almost all informal interactions with journalists. He himself had become bored. To prevent "big press conferences" from resembling a Potemkin village, the Kremlin sometimes even resorted to controlled escalation of the discussion. In December 2012, when one of the authors was working at Izvestia, Aram Gabrelyanov, whom we have already described, ordered the editorial staff to come up with a "tough question" for the president. "Dima [Peskov] asked for it," he added. As a result, the Izvestia journalist asked the tsar why he had created an authoritarian regime in the country and whether it was hindering the nation's development. Putin retorted with pleasure: after all, I resigned in 2008, so everything is democratic.778 After the press conference, Gabrelyanov relayed from "Dima": "It would be better if it were even tougher." It turns out that Putin's press service was trying its best to turn the boss's conference into a show to attract a television audience. These meetings with the press no longer had any other meaning—only populism and Putin's verbal self-satisfaction. But sooner or later, he was bound to need this...

There is.

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Kremlin officials, apparently echoing the Chief, have increasingly begun telling us, "Why even bother with all this? We need to say something new, but there's nothing." In 2017, Putin violated the Constitution—he didn't address parliament that year. A rather ironic moment, but one that explains a lot about Putin. That year, the president had only one piece of news for the vast country: domestic specialists had created a hypersonic weapon (that is, one that could reach its target with unprecedented speed). There was no other news. Therefore, Putin postponed his address to parliament until early 2018, thus timing his militaristic speech to coincide with the presidential election campaign. In 2020, Putin decided to communicate with the public even less frequently—then the "direct line" and the large press conference were combined into a single event, and any controversial issues were also purged. This Putin no longer needed the Kremlin pool of journalists, of which one of the authors of this book had been a member for several years. Gromov systematically emasculated the pool with

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Putin's arrival in the Kremlin was a secretive affair, excluding the most hawkish reporters. Over time, the Kremlin coined the strange term "narrow pool," meaning that only three or four select, most loyal journalists were invited to certain important events. But even this thinly-stocked pool eventually became a liability for Putin. In 2012, for self-promotion and publicly funded entertainment, the president decided to undertake a famous flight with Siberian cranes over Russia's Arctic expanses (we've already mentioned this episode). Apparently, the Kremlin was unsure of the birds' reliability from the very beginning, since only that "narrow," trusted pool was invited to cover the flight. And they were right to do so, because the cranes initially categorically refused to follow the head of state. Had there been decent journalists present, there would have been some scathing reports. But there weren't any. Only on the third attempt, on the second day of the adventure, did several birds finally follow Putin. Naturally, the Kremlin banned the publication of information about the unsuccessful launches. However, despite all the tricks, what happened in the Arctic somehow (apparently by word of mouth) became famous.

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It was well known among journalists. Soon, Reuters published a story about the president's back problems, which apparently arose after some incident during a flight with birds . 779 This was the first report of Putin's health difficulties. The Kremlin was probably furious: so much effort to present Putin as an eternally youthful macho, and all for nothing!

In short, even the emasculated pool created problems. By 2018, Putin had become irritated by literally everything in the press, even the fact that journalists had the opportunity to ask him questions. That year, an RBC employee, where we no longer worked, approached the president at an event while he was passing by with a completely innocent question—about the Crimean Bridge. The problem was that he hadn't coordinated his request with the press service in advance. He was no longer allowed to attend presidential events.

And so the Kremlin came up with a stunningly simple idea: replace the entire pool with a single person. This person was Pavel Zarubin, who managed to show Putin and the country a new level of sycophancy.781 This journalist once anchored the news .

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in Yekaterinburg, but he was quickly noticed and, back in 2005, was taken into the "Kremlin pool" by the Rossiya TV channel. Colleagues remember him as

"The dutiful boy." Many reporters working with Putin quickly lose interest in active work, hampered by constant prohibitions and orders. Zarubin, however, demonstrated interest and energy, for which he was rewarded. Since 2018, Pavel has co-hosted the television program "Moscow. Kremlin. Putin" (along with Solovyov). The latter's role is minor.

admire the Tsar a couple of times and hand the floor over to Zarubin. He then recounts in detail all the heroic deeds Putin had accomplished in the past week. Having effectively eliminated the rest of the pool, the Kremlin decided that Zarubin would be next to the president.

He almost always follows Putin—he even follows him in his motorcade, and sometimes even shares the same car. Zarubin repays this trust in full. He always finds something to admire: the president picked up a pen, opened a curtain, handed over a piece of paper—details like these seem worthy of emphasis to the journalist. In a sense, Zarubin has breathed fresh air into Putin's propaganda: with the help of

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Using simple television techniques, he portrays an energetic and open Putin, someone you can always approach and ask. When describing Zarubin, we call him a journalist, but in reality, he's an employee of the Kremlin press service. When COVID-19 raged in Russia and Putin, more than any other Russian, hid from the infection, Zarubin abandoned his family and household responsibilities for a very long time—he was placed in continuous quarantine at a sanatorium near Moscow, all so that the weekly Putiniana would not stop. After Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022, Zarubin, according to friends, was briefly upset. But the reflection quickly passed, and now the journalist once again admires the president's ability to handle objects.

We are approaching the end of our book. By this point, you have already become convinced that Putin easily manipulates not only office trivia, but also the facts of his own biography, the fates and lives of others, and the very history of Russia. On June 29, 2021, at approximately six o'clock in the morning, law enforcement officers broke into the homes of the authors of this book in Moscow.

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The police began conducting hours-long searches and interrogations. The criminal case they were going to charge us with was fictitious—allegedly, in one of our previous publications, we had slandered the president's friend, the crime boss Ilya Traber (he's discussed in Part Three). Among the officers searching our homes, there were some strong, short-haired men who would occasionally call someone to report on the progress of the search, and then pass on instructions to the rank-and-file officers. After some time—to avoid ending up in prison—

We were forced to leave Russia. Another six months passed, and Putin launched an invasion of Ukraine. That's when we realized who those silent, burly men were who had shown up in our apartments uninvited that summer. They were probably FSB officers overseeing the operation against journalists. Thus, the final act of Putin's war against the press took place—he, with the help of the secret services, decided to purge the country of reporters, literally, physically. In the six months before the invasion and in the first months after it, over five hundred people left Russia as a result of intimidation and repression.

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journalists - those who worked for independent publications or ran their own blogs. The few who
remained - out of principle or due to sluggishness - ended up under investigation or in prison (at least 30 people)784. One might assume that Putin's war with the truth ended in his victory. But you are reading this book, reading

investigative journalism and reporting, which means that not all is lost.

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Epilogue

Do people trust Putin?

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The most disgusting thing about hypocrisy is that it preys on genuine feelings. A deeply religious person can feel sympathy for someone who feigns religiosity. A loving

It's easier for people to trust their country when they make patriotic speeches. Lies are generally captivating,
if there is no time or desire to get to the bottom of the truth, check and compare facts. Surprisingly, hypocrisy takes hold of even

a deceiver, makes him—especially as time goes on—believe in the world he has invented. That's how memory works, that's how self-deception works. We
Before we sat down to write the final part of our book, we ourselves, to put it mildly, misrepresented many events in our journalistic careers. We deceived ourselves and, perhaps, others. Admitting to one's own delusions and mistakes is a great challenge. Even for journalists, whose mistakes are incomparable in the severity of their consequences to those of the ruler. It turns out that each new stage of Vladimir Putin's lies was

predetermined by the previous one and he could not break out of this spiral of deception?

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Robert Schlegel could have become a prominent courtier in today's Russia.785 He was precisely the kind of person who responded to Putin's lies—about love for the homeland, about new opportunities, and much more. Robert comes from a family of Russian Germans exiled to Central Asia. He was born in Ashgabat (then part of the Turkmen SSR) to a single-parent family, from where he moved in the 1990s to a depressed village near Moscow. In 2005, at the age of 20, Robert joined the pro-Putin youth movement "Nashi," about which you already know the main thing: it was literally a school of hypocrisy. A tall, attractive man with a good speech and the skills of a television presenter (Schlegel graduated with a degree in journalism), he quickly rose through the ranks. He became the press secretary of Nashi, and in 2007, the youngest deputy of the State Duma, where he ultimately served two terms, until 2016. In Putin’s United Russia party, which Shle-

represented in parliament, he also confidently moved up - he was responsible for media and in-
ternet, was in charge of international issues and at the peak career rose to the level of member of the Presidium of the General Council (this is something like the Politburo of the Central

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(of the Central Committee at the time when the communists exiled Schlegel's ancestors to Central Asia).

We meet in a cheap kebab shop near the Frankfurt train station. Schlegel only
He stepped off the Munich train, a three-hour journey, just to talk to us. He's visibly uncomfortable, but not just because he once played a significant role in the destruction of free journalism in Russia and is now meeting with the victims of his actions. From certain reservations, it's clear our interlocutor still harbors a slight ache for his former importance. Had he continued to pursue a political career in Russia, he wouldn't have had to travel six hours on a train and sit in a criminal-stinking dive in 2024 just to meet with journalists. Incidentally, on the way back, Schlegel's backpack containing his laptop was indeed stolen. So the losses and worries of the man sitting in front of us were no small matter. So why did he waste an entire day just to talk to us?

In 2016, Schlegel was expelled from the State Duma786 – by that time his relations with the government

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The situation with the ruling party and its Kremlin handlers wasn't very good. He went into private business, and in 2019, he emigrated altogether—as an ethnic German, he and his family received German citizenship and settled in Munich, where he continued working at an IT company with Russian roots. For a while, the story of this downshifting wasn't particularly public, but then the German, and then the Russian, press reported787 on Schlegel's current life. Some saw his move as a spy plot, others called for the punishment of the former Russian deputy, and others accused him of hypocrisy. There were also those who saw Schlegel's actions as remorse for what he had done in Russia. One way or another, Schlegel lost his job due to the fame that had found him. Agreeing to

In a conversation with us, he said he wanted to tell his story frankly.

"Putin needed active, young, and loyal people to change the system. And I liked that idea," Schlegel describes the beginning of his career. "Understand what kind of environment I came from: a migrant from a village. Yes, I sympathized with Putin."

silence at that moment.

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Schlegel's professor at the institute was that same journalist, Vladimir Solovyov, now one of Putin's leading chroniclers. Back then, Solovyov could have been called an oppositionist—he

He hosted a moderately critical television talk show, "To the Barrier!" and occasionally allowed himself to take a jab at the regime. "There was an opposition circle around me, like Solovyov. My decision to join Nashi was a kind of protest against this. To defend Putin's policies. That's what I thought," Shlegel says now. The 2007 parliamentary session, which included the young deputy, was, one might say, *experimental.* Knowing that the young and reputedly progressive Dmitry Medvedev would become president (at least temporarily), the Kremlin, represented by Vladislav Surkov, then curator of domestic policy, decided to play this game to the end. A multitude of new young faces were elected to the State Duma—Nashists like Shlegel, regional sycophants, delegates from women's organizations, and athletes who were Putin's admirers (among them was at least one physical admirer of the president, Alina Kabaeva). Of course, all of these people became deputies.

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not thanks to their outstanding political talents, but as a result of a well-calculated operation by the Kremlin. Most of the new faces were unknown to the country, had not distinguished themselves in any way in the State Duma, and then disappeared without a trace into the innumerable horizontal power structures. Schlegel, on the contrary, did not get lost - from his first days in parliament he was in sight, gave interviews, introduced many bills (a number of them concerned tightening the rules for the media). Most of the initiatives were rejected, but the deputy coped with his main function - creating the appearance of a democratic process. Of course, not everything Schlegel did was innocent and senseless. At the end of 2011, the deputy filed a request with the Prosecutor General's Office about the sources of funding for the independent television channel Dozhd788. At that time, television people covered

anti-Putin protests were rife, and the Kremlin needed Schlegel's request to rein in and intimidate reporters. Several years later, both authors of this book would work for Dozhd—as editor-in-chief and political commentator—but back then, in 2012, the persecution launched by Schlegel led to catastrophic consequences for

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journalists to the consequences. After Schlegel's complaint and the inspections, Dozhd was not included in the list of television channels with federal status. This would have guaranteed it access to the advertising market and, in theory, could have made the television company profitable or certainly break even. But the decision was political and therefore irrevocable - Dozhd under Putin was never again allowed to access advertising money, and in 2022 it was completely forced out of the country. Schlegel understands that his work directly affected both of us. He explains: "I began to understand that a collapse of freedoms was happening. But there had been no reprisals against political opponents yet... More precisely, there was no belief that Putin had done this. There was no open corruption... More precisely, there was no belief that *he* could...

can act." In 2012,

Schlegel was destined to play a key role in the political spectacle already mentioned in our book. On December 12, he, along with other State Duma deputies, listened to the address in the Kremlin from President Putin, who had recently returned to the throne. This was the very speech in which Putin put into words the concept of "spiritual bonds" - a set

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false tenets about family, patriotism, and faith. Schlegel applauded the president, and a few days later voted for the "scoundrels' law," which prohibited Americans from adopting our orphans in retaliation for US sanctions against Russian corrupt officials and criminals. We began our book with this law and its role in the history of Putin's hypocrisy. Now, at the very end, it's time to tell you something special about the "scoundrels."

important.

Formally, the legal norm that went down in history as the "Dima Yakovlev Law" and the "Scoundrels' Law" was merely an amendment to another law. Incidentally, even today, one can fairly accurately determine a person's political views by hearing which of the two versions of the law they use. Such was the symbolism of this "mere amendment" in modern Russian history.

The case began long before December 2012. Putin, who returned to the presidency at the beginning of that year, found himself a new deputy for domestic policy issues—traditionally, these topics are handled by the first deputy head of the presidency.

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administration. This post had been occupied since the beginning of 2012 by the aforementioned Vyacheslav Volodin, a hypocrite and corrupt official whose career had truly focused on just two things: fawning over Putin and obsessively scrubbing the internet of publications about his supposed or real homosexuality. Volodin, a not particularly intellectual member of the nomenklatura, who had once graduated from the Saratov Institute of Agricultural Mechanization, had always considered the education and upbringing of Russian children his specialty. Perhaps this was also influenced by the fact that the boy grew up without a father in the care of his mother, a teacher. It was quite an explosive combination: a recently appointed curator of domestic policy, a narrow-minded careerist with the ambitions of a teacher and a dream of pleasing Putin. In addition to everything else, Volodin had, if one can say so, Soviet ideas about politics: according to his beliefs, the leader of the nation should rely on

archetypal social strata of the times of "developed socialism" - labor and rural collectives, women's organizations, the scientific intelligentsia. "He is simple, like a faceted glass,"

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A colleague of Volodin's described him in a conversation with one of the authors of this book.789 For his own purposes, at the end of 2011, Volodin brought into the State Duma a multitude of nameless scoundrels who matched his ideas about the regime's pillars. He literally dragged many of them from his native Saratov. For example, from there came a pair of activists whose great careers were as shameful as they were fleeting: Olga Batalina and Lyudmila Bokova, Volodin's former secretary and a former high school teacher from the district center in the Saratov region. In the State Duma, this company was joined by a pair of proven opportunists—deputies Ekaterina Lakhova and Elena Afanasyeva, a pediatrician and, again, a teacher. The result was a close-knit group of scoundrels with a fixation on Russian children. Until now, this group, bound by mutual loyalty and careerism, lacked the most important thing—the intelligence to come up with an idea sufficiently sycophantic to present to Putin. But, unfortunately, an idea was found. Throughout 2012, the American Congress, as well as politicians in the UK and other European countries, discussed

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The so-called "Sergei Magnitsky Act." As we've already mentioned, this was the name of the law that imposed financial and visa restrictions on Russian officials and security officials implicated in human rights violations (the document was named after lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who died in a Moscow prison where he was thrown for exposing corruption). The lower house of the US Congress passed the law in November 2012, symbolically repealing the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which had been in effect for decades. This amendment, which had entered into force back in 1974, restricted economic contacts with the USSR, as a country violating human rights (in particular, the right of free Jewish emigration). It turned out that Washington, while lifting one sanction against Moscow, immediately imposed new ones. If you look into it, neither the first nor the second American laws had any serious consequences for Russia. The Jackson Amendment

By 2012, Vanik remained a Cold War relic, with little impact on business practices. The Magnitsky Act applied only to a limited and highly selective list of officials. But both

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laws carried a huge symbolic charge -

From across the ocean, Putin was told that his regime was not Distinguishable from Soviet-era and therefore deserving of punishment. In 2024, as we write these lines, it seems self-evident that Russia is slapped with all sorts of international sanctions—financial, industrial, visa, and so on. And in 2012, the Magnitsky Act was, quite simply, the first law of its kind. Naturally, this infuriated Putin and forced his entourage to seek ways to appease the Tsar's wrath. As Volodin's subordinate recounted, either Batalina or Lakhova hinted at a meeting about the fate of Russian orphans who are adopted and then poorly cared for by American adoptive parents. Volodin was taken with this idea, and they began working on the plan, eventually arriving at the most inhumane formulation: “It is prohibited to transfer children who are citizens of the Russian Federation for adoption to US citizens, as well as the activities of bodies and organizations on the territory of the Russian Federation for the purpose of selecting and transferring children who are citizens of the Russian Federation for adoption to US citizens who wish to...

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"...to adopt the said children."791 We spoke with deputies Lakhova and Batalina at various times and on more than one occasion. Judging by what we saw and heard, it's unlikely they could have conceived, much less written, such a pretentiously harsh law. Most likely, the draft was drafted by Volodin's subordinates in the Kremlin, and this occurred long before the document was submitted to the State Duma. This, however, doesn't excuse Batalina and Lakhova. The Kremlin made them the faces of the "law of scoundrels"—

they had to embarrass themselves in front of the microphones and television cameras, extolling the cannibalistic idea. When the bill was ready, the Kremlin staged a performance of its serf theater. The main bill was introduced on December 10th—it was signed by hundreds of Kremlin-controlled deputies and senators, most of whom, of course, were seeing the text for the first time. The draft, however, didn't mention orphans; the law seemed toothless. In response to visa sanctions against our people, we imposed equally toothless restrictions on American officials. Rattling not even real weapons, but paper ones. Of course, the amendment regarding children was already ready by then—

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But it was held back so as not to anger society or cast a shadow on Putin, who was delivering his annual address to parliament two days later, on December 12. That day, Putin publicly articulated the doctrine of "spiritual bonds," and on December 17, deputies, seemingly developing the president's ideas, introduced an amendment regarding orphans. On December 19, it, along with the entire law, was adopted in the second and main reading. From then on, everything was a matter of technique—

The regulation came into effect in January 2013. The key amendment was signed by Lakhova and Afanasyeva. Both women didn't even attend the meeting of the parliamentary committee that discussed "their" proposal. Years later, it's pleasant to think

that at that moment the female deputies were overcome with a sense of shame. But even if that were the case, very soon Lakhova, Afanasyeva, Batalina, and other deputies of both sexes clearly came to terms with their shameful role, gave dozens of scathing interviews, and subsequently
many more repressive laws were passed. It is interesting that, according to the canons of the Kremlin theater, women, someone's mothers, were deliberately chosen to be the authors and popularizers of such a monstrous norm. This way, the audience was supposed to

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believe in the sincere motives of the innovation and not
notice that its entire purpose was to satisfy the ruler's ambitions for power. Putin could applaud his actresses. The word "actor" in Russian has a feminine form, while "scoundrel" has a feminine form.

No.

We would not like to give you the wrong impression that all the blame for the introduction
The blame for the "orphan" law lies with the jaded careerist Volodin and the female deputies he recruited. The main blame lies with Putin and his hypocrisy. He was well aware of the issue of orphanhood in Russia. While still working in the St. Petersburg mayor's office, according to recollections, he signed some documents related to the removal of orphans abroad.792 Once, Leningrad City Council deputies even identified a fraudster who offered adoption support services in Spain, showing a real ID from the Committee on Foreign Relations signed by Putin.793 More than a year before the adoption of the "law of scoundrels," on September 1, 2011, Prime Minister Putin visited a school in Podolsk. There, he was asked, among other things, about adoption, for example, by foreigners. To which Putin replied

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It's simple: the legislation on this matter is already "pretty strict."794 By that time, more than three years had passed since the tragic death of Dima Yakovlev in the United States. But the prime minister didn't even mention this incident; he seemed satisfied with Russian adoption regulations. Instead, Putin recalled another telling story.795 His friend, former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, adopted two Russian orphans—a girl and a boy—in the early 2000s. Both were raised in the same St. Petersburg Children's Home No. 1 (with a psychoneurological profile). The circumstances of the adoptions are kept secret, but two things are known. First, Schröder did everything "through connections"—the waiting list of other Germans applying to adopt Russian orphans at the time was several thousand people.796 Secondly, Putin most likely helped his German friend avoid the required legal formalities. This is also indicated by the age of the adopted boy, Gregor (Grisha in Russia). He was adopted when he was only 10 months old. Child protection officials were amazed at such speed, since all the necessary legal procedures were observed.

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According to the procedures, the earliest age a boy could be placed with a family was one year. Sources said that those higher up had asked to "hold back" the child, who had just been admitted to the orphanage, specifically for Schröder—after all, Grisha had no noticeable developmental delays and was a desirable target for important adoptive parents. When Putin spoke to schoolchildren in Podolsk in 2011, he recounted many details of Schröder's story, leaving no doubt: he was deeply versed in the matter and was helping his friend. Why did Putin do this? The answer is horrific. In 2005, Schröder lost the German election and lost his chancellorship. But he managed to give Putin an important gift: that year, the basic agreement for the construction of the Nord Stream gas pipeline was signed, through which Gazprom's gas is transported to Germany and thence to other European countries. This was of utmost importance to Putin: Nord Stream, once operational, would provide Russia with a steady flow of money, a significant portion of which would go toward satisfying Putin and his cronies' personal thirst for wealth. As soon as Schröder lost his post as chancellor, Putin personally proposed

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He earned his job—heading a joint venture managing a gas pipeline. Schröder accepted the offer and received a sizable salary from Putin for many years to come. The president also gave his friend a child without developmental delays, bypassing queues and red tape. In other words, by 2012, Putin wasn't just satisfied with the existing adoption procedure; he was even willing to violate it to please foreign couples (at least a select few). But when it came to playing the role of a parent concerned about Russian children, he donned this mask without hesitation. Robert Schlegel recalls that the United Russia faction was assembled before the vote: "I asked why we were doing this inhumane and harmful bullshit, and I was told that this was the leadership's decision, a

fundamental one, and any deviation, anything other than support, would have the most serious consequences." Volodin is a Soviet functionary in every way. According to his plan, Putin needed unanimous support. Even the pseudo-opposition factions in parliament—A Just Russia, the Communists, and the Liberal Democrats—were forced to vote for him.

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Kratov. As has been shown repeatedly in this book, plans based on lies often end in stupidity. Deputy Vyacheslav Osipov, whose death was recorded by the doctor that morning, even before the State Duma session, voted for the "law of scoundrels." United Russia later made a ridiculous excuse for their now-deceased fellow party member: supposedly, the elderly deputy Osipov, who had been seriously ill with cancer for a long time, asked his colleagues to vote for him using his electronic card. Theater, such theater. Igor Lebedev, an LDPR deputy and Vladimir Zhirinovsky's unloved son, played a cameo role in the play, albeit one that usually draws laughter from the entire audience. When the lower house of parliament voted for the bill in its final reading, Lebedev, then serving as no less than deputy speaker of the State Duma, quietly left the chamber, taking his electronic card with him (to prevent his colleagues from casting their vote for him). These same colleagues later comically defended their boss, claiming he had gone to the restroom for an urgent need. Clearly, this was a lie, because the day before, Lebedev had posted an unambiguous message on his social media: "I don't want to vote..."

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"Poke, but party discipline." The deputy would later erase this entry. United Russia member Alexander Sidyakin also fled the hall, but he prudently left his card with his colleagues, who voted as required. There were only seven votes against, three of which belonged to obviously pro-government candidates. United Russia member Boris Reznik was a star of Soviet journalism; he had been in parliament since the 1990s. Communist Zhores Alferov was a Nobel Prize laureate in physics, and his party colleague Oleg Smolin was a renowned teacher and the only blind State Duma deputy. These three were perhaps united by the fact that, due to their age and status, they were not particularly intimidated. United Russia member Maria Maksakova, an opera diva and gossip columnist, abstained from voting. Schlegel voted for all readings. As he recalls, he somehow felt the president was unaware of the law's true content and wouldn't sign it. Perhaps the youngest State Duma deputy was childishly naive. But more likely, he fell victim to the hypocrisy to which we dedicated our book. How can a leader who speaks beautiful words be a scoundrel?

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Even when Putin, without batting an eye, signed the inhumane law, Schlegel decided all was not lost. He wrote an amendment exempting disabled orphans—the most vulnerable residents of Russian orphanages, who, if lucky, had previously often been adopted by American families—from the "law of scoundrels." Schlegel again hoped that his amendment would appeal to Putin. But his fellow party members forbade his young colleague from even considering the initiative. "Today, looking back, I realize I should have voted against it, but back then there was some hope that everyone would come to their senses at the last minute," Schlegel says. From that moment on, his rift with the Russian government began. In 2015, as his term as a member of parliament was ending, Schlegel applied for diplomatic work—"I wanted to at least leave the country." He was rejected, and he was never re-appointed to the State Duma. Almost everyone else who protested the law in one way or another was also punished in their careers (and some even criminally). Schlegel laughs sadly: “[By 2016] I already had two children, and I had to think about how to live. I’m not joking, I’m not

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I'm exaggerating—that was exactly the question. And not only with what, but also where—at that time, we didn't have our own place to live."

We've seen many politicians lie. We're even writing a book about one of them. Schlegel, as far as we can tell, was sincere with us—both in his repentance and in his worries about his subsequent unsettled life.

st.

This is a photo shoot of Putin with children who came to the New Year's tree in the Kremlin in late December 2017. Putin, like almost all autocrats, loves to take photos with children. In the same year, journalists compiled statistical data.

the "law of scoundrels" has been put into effect. A curious thing has come to light. At first glance, the number of orphans in the country has decreased,

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Which should certainly be a cause for celebration. Paradoxically, the number of adoptions of foster children by Russian families has also dropped significantly. The answer? It's simple. To compensate for the loss of adoptive parents from abroad, the Russian budget has begun spending significantly more money on the institution of so-called "family guardianship." The state pays additional fees to families (usually in rural areas) willing to take a child from an orphanage into their care. This isn't adoption—it's more like a family-run orphanage. Such a child can be returned to the boarding school (and, according to statistics, they often are, without losing their state payments). It often happens that children in foster care are subjected to violence, neglect, and are treated as a means of personal enrichment (such a child, for example, retains the right to housing from the state, which their guardians can use).

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Schlegel is one of thousands of people who rose to power, seduced by Putin's lies. As journalists, we've always been preoccupied with the question: how many people around Putin truly believe in him?

In mid-2003, Olga Kryshtanovskaya, a sociologist from the Academy of Sciences, presented the first major study of Putin's court—her research team examined the biographies of three and a half thousand officials working in government bodies, from the Kremlin to the regions. Based on this

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In a study, Kryshtanovskaya's column "Putin's People" for the liberal newspaper Vedomosti caused quite a stir. "In the three years of Putin's presidency, the Russian elite has changed fundamentally," Kryshtanovskaya wrote.

"The corridors of power are filled with men in uniform." She compared the number of security officers in the department with the figures from 1993. It turned out that the representation of officers in power under Putin has significantly more than doubled (accounting for 25.1% of the total number of profiles studied). The number of apparatchiks—Putin's fellow countrymen—also increased rapidly (21.3%). In other words, the same old Chekists, St. Petersburgers, and gangsters we described.

We've already reported on the sharp and rapid proliferation of security officers and the president's cronies in power since the beginning of Putin's first term. Now, years later, this observation seems obvious, but in 2003, Kryshtanovskaya's article was a sobering revelation. The sociologist was quoted and invited to interviews at the still-intact independent editorial boards. She spoke of the harm of the security forces in power, the dangers of authoritarianism, and made other insightful remarks.

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She used such garish words that some members of the intelligentsia considered her almost a Cassandra. Then, unexpectedly, she joined United Russia, and a little later, became Putin's confidant in the 2012 elections. This turn of events shocked many. Like Shlegel, Kryshtanovskaya became a willing victim of the simulated political process under interim President Medvedev. The Kremlin invited new faces to power, some unexpected, and then used them for its own purposes in a rather mocking manner: they were tasked with providing a semblance of legitimacy for Putin's return to the throne, passing the "law of scoundrels," introducing "spiritual bonds," persecuting the opposition, the media, and LGBTQ people, suppressing religious diversity, and covering up, if not directly participating in, pervasive corruption. As Kryshtanovskaya told one of the authors of this book years later, joining the ruling party was for her a “special research operation” –

way of looking at the subject of her study from the inside800. At the same time, the sociologist admits: she did not think that “she would be taken into circulation so abruptly.” Whether wittingly or not, Schlegel and Kryshta-

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Kryshtanovskaya and Putin became accomplices in many evil deeds committed by Putin and his court. They themselves were part of this court at the time, not hostages living under guard in a distant outpost. They had a choice: remain in power (perhaps rise to high positions, perhaps dissolve into tacit loyalty) or leave. We have already discussed how Schlegel handled this choice. Kryshtanovskaya left United Russia in the summer of 2012. Whatever their motives, they managed to break free from the spiral of lies and vileness. Upon leaving the party, Kryshtanovskaya again made an accurate prediction: "Now [Putin's bureaucracy] has the opportunity to transform itself into a hereditary aristocracy." In 2024–2025, simultaneously with the writing of this book, my colleagues and I from the publication “Proekt” conducted a large-scale study, largely repeating the scientific work of Kryshtanovskaya. Taking more than a thousand top-level Russian civil servants (all members of parliament, the leadership of the

presidential administration, ministries, services and the government apparatus, all the heads of state,

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(Governors and regional heads, as well as some other high-ranking officials), we conducted a thorough background check of their biographies using all the methods now available to investigative journalists. What were we looking for? Above all, we wanted to understand how these people rose to power. Did they come from the street, inspired by the president's words, like Schlegel and many of his colleagues at the beginning of the Putin era? Or did they rise to power through connections?

Is it because of family ties, affiliation with the security services, or the boss's patronage? And what about their own children and other relatives, what do they do? Are there bureaucratic dynasties forming in today's Russia, with courtiers passing on power and wealth to their heirs?

The bad news has come to light. At least 20% of civilian officials are officers (this doesn't include those currently heading law enforcement agencies, or those whose immediate family members—parents, spouses, and children—are officers of law enforcement agencies). But there's something even more interesting. At least two-thirds (66%) of civil servants provide their relatives with jobs funded by the state budget, and conduct

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They are promoted to significant positions in Putin's vertical power structure or—what happens just as often—employed by companies somehow connected to state funding. Official dynasties, sometimes vast and extensive, are indeed forming in the country. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, about whom we have spoken extensively, has at least 93 relatives working in the public administration system. Senator Arsen Kanokov has 20 relatives in government positions or as nominees, and State Duma Deputy Speaker Sholban Kara-ool has eight. Almost all the important figures in our book, from Putin, Patrushev, Fradkov, Medvedev, and down the line, have, almost without exception, secured positions in government or in Kremlin-connected businesses for their children and other relatives. Besides kinship, career advancement has been achieved through connections, patronage, acquaintances, and "kunachestvo"—all of these terms mean the same thing in different parts of Russia. On top of the hereditary power transfer network, regional communities of power are also rapidly forming in the country—the Caucasus, Kuban, Tyumen, Yakut, and, of course, the St. Petersburg community.

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Putin has a family line on his father's side, all of whose members lived, studied, and worked within the so-called Golden Ring of Russia—in Ivanovo, Suzdal, and Vladimir. No one would have remembered this family if, in 2018, a certain Mikhail Putin, 51, hadn't suddenly been appointed deputy head of Gazprom (we briefly recounted this episode above). The appointment was swift; the board of directors of the largest company was convened via conference call to approve just one item on the agenda—

"About M. E. Putin"802. The vote was, naturally, unanimous. The recognizable surname prompted journalists to ask Dmitry Peskov, Putin's press secretary, whether this was the president's relative. He answered literally: "M. E. Putin" is a "distant relative" of the president, with whom he "virtually does not communicate"803. The authors of this book spent a lot of time unraveling the tangle of Putin family ties, only to finally become convinced once again how brazenly the president and his press secretary are lying. Mikhail Putin is the second cousin once removed of the head of state (his cousin's son), he is originally from Ivanovo, where, following his

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Their parents graduated from medical school. Mikhail trained as a psychiatrist and addiction specialist and worked in his field for a time. With Putin's rise to power, Mikhail began a rapid upward mobility —from a provincial doctor to a top manager in various government-related structures, eventually becoming one of Gazprom's top executives. This career advancement was clearly due to high-level patronage. We soon discovered that Vladimir Putin was lying when his press secretary claimed to have only casually known Mikhail. The answer was once again found in a shelved early biography of the president. Oleg Blotsky's book contains a photograph of Putin's relatives in Ivanovo with an interesting comment from the head of state:

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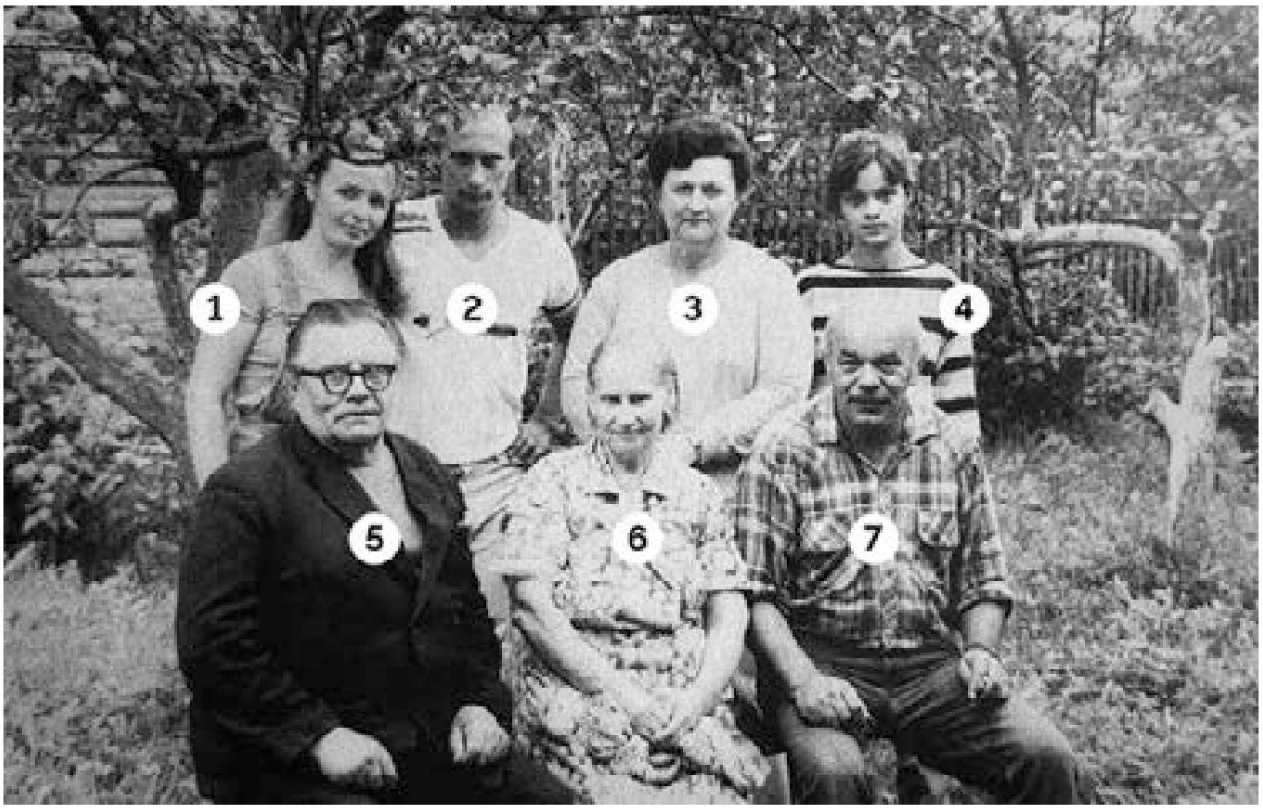

Vladimir Putin and his family at his parents' dacha near Leningrad. 1) Lyudmila Putina, wife. 2) Vladimir Putin. 3) Diya Putina, brother's wife. 4) Anna Putina (Tsivileva), niece. 5) Vladimir Putin, father. 6) Maria Putina, mother. 7) Yevgeny Putin, cousin.

Oleg Blotsky. Vladimir Putin, 2003

"I don't know the family history very well. You'd better ask Yevgeny Mikhailovich. He's a wonderful storyteller and knows much more about the family than I do." Putin is speaking of his cousin Yevgeny, Mikhail's father. He is the "keeper of the family memory," Putin adds. It's unlikely that people with whom one "virtually has no contact" are recommended as "great storytellers."

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If you noticed, Mikhail himself isn't in the photo—he was most likely the one taking the picture. The card, in addition to the Leningrad part of the Putin family, includes Mikhail's parents and sister.

The young brunette on the right is Anna Putina. Her career developed just as mysteriously and rapidly. In 2007, young Anna married retired naval officer Sergei Tsivilev. At the time, he was working minor roles for Putin's acquaintances in St. Petersburg. Apparently, this is how Anna met her fiancé. As soon as they got married, the Tsivilevs were showered with gifts. Anna's husband, for example, became a contractor for Lenexpo.

This is the place where Putin held the St. Petersburg Economic Forum every year at the beginning of summer. The Tsivilevs then became shareholders and managers of the small, then increasingly important, coal company Kolmar. The two had no knowledge of coal or the money to buy the business: he was an officer, and she, again, a shrink who had worked at the Ivanovo psychiatric hospital before her uncle's rise to power. Putin then appointed Tsivilev governor of a large, strategically important region—the Kemerovo Oblast.

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The governor's wife, as we discovered, was just as influential in the region as her husband. And her subordinates feared her far more, because word of mouth was among the first to inform them that Anna Tsivileva was somehow related to the president himself. Yes, the governor's wife was related.

No one openly acknowledged her relationship with the Tsar throughout her entire career. Official biographies elegantly concealed information about Tsivileva's origins, obsequious interviews avoided the topic, and independent media suppressed it. So for many years, Anna Evgenievna skillfully concealed her maiden name and attributed all her successes to hard work and talent. We published our investigation in early 2022. A month later, Putin launched a full-scale aggression against Ukraine, in which the Tsivilevas once again found a place. Putin appointed Sergei Minister of Energy of Russia—an exceptionally important position in a situation where almost the country's only export income depends on energy trade. The president first made his niece the head of the public foundation "Defenders of the Fatherland"—an organization that...

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The Kremlin created this to demonstrate its concern for the veterans of the new war, unleashed at the whim of the Tsar. Tsivileva was then appointed Deputy Minister of Defense—responsible for financial and social care for the military. This is also a very important position in a country at war. Incidentally, if you thought that officials, as required by law, had now gotten rid of their coal business, you're dead wrong—Kolmar still belongs to the Tsivilevs. In other words, the Minister of Energy oversees the same industry in which his company operates. But such trifles as conflicts of interest have long ceased to distract Putin from his reign. If you also thought that the president has stopped hiding his blood ties to the Tsivilev family, you're also mistaken—no one in the Kremlin has acknowledged the fact that two members of the government are related to the head of state.

In Russia, of course, it has happened before that members of the government were secretly or openly related to each other. But only once have two top officials also been related to the president... We began the book with a description of the so-called "family" of Boris Yeltsin. In the late 1990s, the presi-

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Dent's daughter Tatyana was listed as an adviser to the son-became the head of state and then the head of the Kremlin administration. Her boyfriend and later husband, Valentin Yumashev, became
took the position of head of the administration and presidential adviser. It's ironic that, having once received power from Yeltsin's "family," Putin, 25 years later, has adopted the same form of government, albeit with a far greater sinister edge—he's surrounded by family members, close associates of the nouveau riche, sycophants, and murderers of varying skill levels. How did the protagonist of our book make this journey?

At first, he was an unassuming provincial official, whom the impoverished Soviet way of life had left with complexes, and whose service in the KGB—

cruelty and meanness. Then, by the will of others, the small official became the most important person in the country, but at first he perceived his new role only as a temporary opportunity to get rich, to provide himself, his friends, and loved ones with a comfortable life until death, and at the same time to have fun with girls in baths decorated with gold leaf. He probably had a chance to jump out of this wheel, as Schlegel did, albeit

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and a loss of privileges and prosperity. But no—under the influence of the courtiers' unrestrained flattery, their lies, and sycophancy, the ordinary official began to imagine himself a tsar. The consequence of this transformation, apparently, was a sense of threat, greatly amplified by his phobias—what if, after all this, he had to answer for what he had already done? This motive likely once played a significant role in Yeltsin's "family" choosing Putin as their successor —he was a guarantee of their safety. Now Putin faced the same fear, only far more justified. Hiding old sins—the crimes of the "office," the plundered assets of Gazprom, lawlessness in Chechnya, and so on—Putin inevitably committed new ones. Each new turn of this spiral grew shorter. The only people in whom the 25-year-old former “successor” does not see danger are his relatives and people connected to him by the same

dark past.

The Putin-Tsivilevs, to put it mildly, are not the only example of this kind. Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Patrushev is the son of another hero of our book, Nikolai Patrushev. Everyone

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A government clerk, talking to us about Dmitry, considers it his duty to roll his eyes and add: "A candidate for succession."805 Patrushev Jr. is indeed being touted as the one to whom Putin might leave the throne. The same rumor has it about security guard Alexei Dyumin, who is like a son to Putin.806 There is a region in Russia where literally *all* executive positions belong to relatives of the local leader or his closest friends. This is

Chechnya. One of the sons of the local ruler, Ramzan Kadyrov.

will inevitably inherit his father's position if something happens to him. While researching Chechen issues, we once came across a very precise answer about all of Russia. Why does Kadyrov appoint his relatives to all positions, we asked his former colleague. "I have a small company,"

he began. “I appointed my wife as an accountant because I don’t want money matters, taxes, and the like to become known to anyone outside the family. And with Ramzan, it’s even more so.” Kadyrov doesn’t trust ordinary Chechens and is wary of

they are - and, one must think, for good reason; they also

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They don't trust him, even though propaganda would have us believe otherwise. The same can be said for a large number of people: Putin trusts only a very small group of people, each of whom relies on their own, also small, cohort of relatives and cronies. We don't know what percentage of Russia's population this network of kinship and trust encompasses. But it's certainly much less than the 87.28% of votes attributed to Putin in the most recent presidential election, which was just as unfree as before.

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PUTIN'S PEOPLE

Fates and careers

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Chekists

Alexander Grigoriev, a fellow KGB officer in Leningrad, headed

Rosrezerv, managed billions of rubles from the state budget, and his family received stakes in major companies. He died in 2008, and the family lost their business shares.

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Viktor Cherkesov, a fellow KGB officer in Leningrad,

headed the Federal Drug Control Service, an influential law enforcement agency. He became one of the leaders of the Athos Society. He fell into disgrace as a result of his struggle with other "Chekists" in Putin's entourage. He lost his post as head of the Federal Drug Control Service and subsequently served as a State Duma deputy for the Communist Party. He died in 20

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Sergei Ivanov, a KGB colleague, a native of Leningrad ,
Minister of Defense,
and later First Vice-President
Prime Minister, one of two potential "successors" to Putin before the 2008 elections. He lost the bureaucratic battle to Dmitry Medvedev, who became president of Russia. Afterward, he held positions in the government and the presidential administration, and in 2016, he was sent into "honorary retirement" and became the president's envoy for environmental issues.

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Viktor Zolotov, a KGB officer, later an FSO officer, Anatoly Sobchak's bodyguard in the 1990s

He headed President Putin's personal security detail and later became commander of the Russian National Guard, an influential security agency that primarily performs punitive functions, such as dispersing rallies and so on. Associated with Zolotov

and his family members became owners of numerous business assets. He remains in Putin's inner circle.

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Yevgeny Murov, a KGB officer and later an FSO officer, was in charge of security at the St. Petersburg mayor's office when Putin worked there.

He headed the Federal Protective Service (FSO), the influential security agency responsible for protecting the president and senior officials. His family and associates acquired numerous business assets. He fell into disgrace as a result of a struggle with other security officials for turf in business. In 2016, he was dismissed from the FSO. At the same time, Dmitry Mikhalchenko (aka "Krikun"), a shadow businessman connected to Murov, was arrested and imprisoned.

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Andrei Akimov, born in Leningrad. During the Soviet era, he lived in Europe and worked in the Soviet foreign trade system. According to the press, he collaborated with the KGB.

Under Putin as president, he headed Gazprombank, one of Russia's key financial institutions, closely tied to Putin's friends. He still leads Gazprombank, although the president's trust in him may have been undermined in 2015. At that time, Akimov was the only Russian official to confirm to foreign journalists that Katerina Tikhonova was Putin's daughter. Akimov was later forced to defend himself, claiming he had made no such comments.

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Vladimir Yakunin, a KGB officer, worked in Leningrad, then in New York under cover UN

He became the head of Russian Railways (RZD), one of the largest state-owned enterprises in Russia. People associated with him built a network of companies that earned colossal sums of money from RZD contracts. He lost his position in 2015 after a protracted and heated conflict with Dmitry Medvedev. Some businessmen associated with him lost their earnings. He no longer holds government office and describes himself as a "political..."

logos».

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Nikolai Patrushev, a fellow soldier in the Leningrad KGB

He headed the FSB, Russia's main intelligence agency. Patrushev's sons occupied prominent positions in the government apparatus and state-owned companies. He ceased leading the FSB in 2008, when Dmitry Medvedev became president. Since then, he served as Secretary of the Security Council and Presidential Aide, remaining a close adviser to Putin on security matters. But in 2024, he was transferred to the position of Presidential Aide for Shipbuilding. This is an "honorary"

pension.

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Gennady Timchenko, who lived in Leningrad since his student days, allegedly worked for the KGB in the 1980s. He

became the owner of major companies in the energy and infrastructure sectors. He remains a trusted confidant of Putin.

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Viktor Korytov, a fellow soldier in the Leningrad KGB

In the 1990s, he held senior positions in companies associated with Putin and his associates. He did business with Ilya Traber, a "gangster" from Putin's inner circle. With Putin's rise to the Kremlin, he became head of security at Gazprombank, one of Russia's largest banks. He never rose above the rank of deputy head of Gazprombank.

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Igor Sechin, a native of Leningrad, worked abroad and in foreign trade in the 1980s (presumably for the KGB), and was Putin's secretary in the St. Petersburg mayor's office in the 1990s.

He held important government positions in 2000–2012. He fell into disgrace at the end of Putin’s second presidential term – head of state

The former president suspected his old comrade of having excessive political ambitions. He has been out of government service since 2012. He currently heads Russia's largest oil company, Rosneft.

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Andrei Belyaninov, a KGB officer, worked under the cover of the Soviet embassy in the GDR when Putin was working in the same country.

After Putin came to power, he held the leadership
He held leading positions in structures involved in the export of Russian weapons. In 2006, he became head of customs. He fell into disgrace after 2016 as a result of a struggle with other "Chekists" in the president's entourage. Belyaninov's home was searched, revealing footage of the luxurious interior and stacks of cash hidden in cabinets. He was fired and currently holds no significant positions, but has not faced any further punishment.

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Alexander Bortnikov, a fellow KGB officer in Leningrad, was

Deputy Head of the FSB and, since 2008, head of Russia's main intelligence agency. He remains close to Putin in the security services.

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Igor Shchegolev, a TASS correspondent in Paris, recalled his colleagues.

and acquaintances809, was an employee of the Soviet and Russian intelligence services in France

He held various government posts, culminating in his career as Minister of Communications from 2008 to 2012. He lost his ministerial post following tensions with Dmitry Medvedev. He currently serves as the Presidential Representative for the Central Regions of Russia.

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Sergei Chemezov, Putin's colleague and friend from the KGB mission in Dresden. After Germany, he served in the KGB's Fifth Directorate, responsible for dealing with dissidents. He was a seconded employee of the Suzsporto-obespechenie (Syuzsport-obespechenie) agency.

Under President Putin, he gradually took charge of all state defense production. At the same time, he became incredibly wealthy. He was involved in several squabbles within Putin's inner circle, but did not lose his position. He now serves as the head of the state corporation Rostec.

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Valery Golubev, a fellow KGB officer in Leningrad and a colleague at the St. Petersburg mayor's office

He received the post of deputy head of Gazprom. Companies associated with him had been enriching themselves for years through government contracts. After the publication of investigations into his secret income, he retreated into the shadows. He leads a comfortable life. a wealthy pensioner.

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Mikhail Fradkov, who worked in the foreign trade system during Soviet times, almost always indicated ties to the KGB. It was then that he met intelligence officer Vladimir Yakunin. He worked in the government back in the 1990s, when Putin was just beginning

his rise to power. During his visits to Moscow, Yakunin would stay with Fradkov. Under Putin as president, he reached the pinnacle of his career—he became the country's prime minister and was even considered by some as a possible presidential candidate. His old friend became a victim of Putin's jealousy. Upon learning of Fradkov's personnel ambitions, Putin fired him from the government in 2007. He graduated from

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He never really dropped out of the picture—for example, he served as head of the Foreign Intelligence Service. He's now "honorably retired," and his children are successfully building careers in Putin's establishment.

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Georgy Poltavchenko, a fellow soldier in the Leningrad KGB

He held important government posts, rising to the rank of governor of St. Petersburg. The Poltavchenko family acquired stakes in major companies. He was one of the leaders of the "Orthodox lobby" in Putin's inner circle. He was dismissed from his post as governor in 2018, as the Kremlin was dissatisfied with him. He was granted an "honorary pension"—a position heading a state-owned shipbuilding company—but Poltavchenko later lost that, too.

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BANDITS

Roman Tsepov, Putin's bodyguard in St. Petersburg

He managed a large security company, communicated with the country's president and his entourage. He was brutally murdered in 2004. Circumstantial evidence points to the involvement of Russian intelligence services in the murder. The murder case was never investigated.
given.

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Arkady Rotenberg, Putin's partner in

Rotenberg's **companies** have become the largest recipients of government contracts in Russia, making him a billionaire. He remains close to Putin and has retained most of his vast fortune despite sanctions and cuts to state

orders.

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Boris Rotenberg, Putin's judo partner

Thanks to his older brother, he also became a billionaire and the recipient of major government contracts. He remains a prominent businessman, despite his deteriorating relationship with his brother.

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Viktor Khmarin, Putin's judo partner, distant relative (married to Putin's cousin), and the president's failed brother-in-law (Putin planned to marry Khmarin's sister)

His companies became recipients of major government contracts. He lost a significant portion of his income due to a conflict with Arkady Rotenberg. Putin also lost favor with his childhood friend and relative. Journalists wrote that this was because Khmarin was too talkative.

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Vasily Shestakov, Putin's partner in judo

He was elected to parliament, and his son became a high-ranking official. Companies associated with the Shestakov family earned huge sums of money from government contracts with Rosrezerv, the Federal Agency for State Reserves, which Putin appointed as its head another friend, Alexander Grigoriev. He lost his seat in the State Duma and is now involved in public activities related to judo and sambo.

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Konstantin Goloshchapov, Putin's partner in judo

He became involved in business related to government contracts and headed the Athonite Society. By 2022, he had lost his former influence and encountered legal problems.

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Ilya Traber, a St. Petersburg criminal

a prominent authority figure who has known Putin since the 90s

Through his partners and front men,
He gained control over numerous enterprises in the transportation and energy sectors. At some point, he settled in Europe. After publications about his connections with the president, he was forced to leave Europe, where a criminal investigation was launched against him. Traber's business empire in Russia continues to grow.

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Yevgeny Prigozhin, a St. Petersburg businessman with a criminal past, has known Putin since the late 1990s.

He became the owner of a vast network of companies profiting from government contracts—in the food service, cleaning, construction, and natural resources sectors. He founded the private military company Wagner, which operated worldwide in the Kremlin's interests. He died in a plane crash in 2023. He was presumably liquidated on Putin's orders.

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Vladimir Barsukov (Kumarin), a St. Petersburg crime boss who has been Putin's acquaintance since the 1990s

He acquired stakes in major companies in the fuel, construction, and entertainment sectors. In 2007, following a conflict with other criminal figures close to Putin, he was arrested and subsequently sentenced to several lengthy prison terms. Given his previous convictions, he will not be released until 2030, when he will be well into his 70s.

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Gennady Petrov, St. Petersburg criminal national authority, known to Putin since the 90s

He acquired stakes in major companies in the financial, fuel, construction, and entertainment sectors. He influenced political decisions and personnel policies in the Kremlin. In 2008, he was arrested in Spain and spent some time in custody. He was accused of ties to Russian organized crime. He managed to escape to Russia, where he has since lived the life of a wealthy retiree.

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Vladislav Reznik, a former pentathlete, worked part-time as a stuntman at Len-Film, like Putin and Rotenberg

He was one of the founders of Bank Rossiya, which was later acquired by Putin's friends and acquaintances. In the 1990s, he did business with many of Putin's inner circle, including Petrov, Traber, and others. After Putin became president, he became a State Duma deputy, where he was known for his active lobbying. He possessed a vast fortune. In 2008, he was accused in Spain, where he owned property, of ties to the Tambov crime group. The investigation and trial lasted until 2018, when Reznik was acquitted due to insufficient evidence. He continues to serve as a State Duma deputy.

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Dmitry Medvedev, Putin's subordinate in the St. Petersburg mayor's office . Third President of Russia (2008–2012). Prime Minister of Russia (2012–2020). Companies associated with Medvedev earned millions of dollars and provided him with a luxurious lifestyle. Disagreements and conflicts with Putin and the "Chekists" in his entourage began during Medvedev's time as interim president. In 2012, Putin forced him to abandon his presidential ambitions and accept the post of head of government. These personnel upheavals had a psychological impact.

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Medvedev and his entourage's state of emergency. Some people close to Medvedev were detained.
and were imprisoned, others lost their positions or were forced to leave Russia. Med-
leading, according to his acquaintances, to drown his frustration in alcohol and neglect his official duties.811 As a result, Putin fired Medvedev from his post as prime minister, which, according to our interlocutors, was devastating for the former president.

shock.

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Alexey Miller, Putin's subordinate in the St. Petersburg mayor's office, became the head of

Gazprom, one of Russia's largest state-owned companies. Companies associated with Miller earned millions of dollars from state contracts. He remains the head of Gazprom. During his tenure, the market capitalization of the largest gas company fell several times. Miller was forced to part with a huge number of Gazprom's valuable assets to please other members of Putin's inner circle.

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Boris Gryzlov, a classmate of Nikolai Patrushev at the Leningrad school, later de-
member of the Leningrad Komsomol

He became the Minister of Internal Affairs, and then - speaker of the lower house of the Russian parliament
A former state official, Gryzlov was the fourth-highest-ranking official in the country. In 2011, he lost his position as speaker of the State Duma and hasn't held any significant government positions since. He is currently Russia's ambassador to Belarus, which can be considered an "honorary pension." Gryzlov was pushed out of the top positions due to his high negative ratings, which cast a shadow on President Putin.

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Vladimir Gundyaev (Patriarch Kirill), rector of the Leningrad Theological Academy

Initially, he was given responsibility for financial matters of the Russian Orthodox Church, and in 2009, he became the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. He remains Patriarch, although he is engaged in a constant political battle with another priest close to Putin, Metropolitan Tikhon Shevkunov.

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German Gref, Putin's subordinate in the St. Petersburg mayor's office

He was the Minister of Economic Development in several governments during Putin's first two terms. In 2007, he left the government and became head of Sberbank, Russia's largest bank. He maintains a personal relationship with Putin, although his current influence on the president, like that of other liberal-minded economists, can be assessed as insignificant.

body.

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Alexey Kudrin, a colleague at the St. Petersburg mayor's office

Minister of Finance in several governments. In 2011, he was demonstratively dismissed from his government post. The reason was
public conflict with another member of Putin's inner circle, then-President Dmitry Medvedev.

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Viktor Zubkov, a colleague at the St. Petersburg mayor's

office, helped Putin and his friends organize the Ozero dacha

cooperative. He held high government positions. In 2007–2008, he was Prime Minister of Russia and was even considered a possible presidential candidate. He also chaired the board of directors of Gazprom. He has held no significant positions since 2012. At that time, the Zubkov family found itself at the center of a court scandal. Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov was married to Zubkov's daughter, Yulia. However, Serdyukov was unfaithful to her—he cohabited with his subordinate, Evgenia.

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Vasilyeva. As journalists wrote, Zubkov sought punishment for his unfaithful son-in-law, which he ultimately achieved.812 Moreover, the "Chekists" in Putin's entourage, for their own reasons, wanted to punish Serdyukov as a member of Dmitry Medvedev's team. Ultimately, Vasilyeva was arrested for corruption, and Serdyukov was humiliatingly fired—his home was searched precisely during an intimate encounter with his mistress.813

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Anatoly Serdyukov, an entrepreneur from St. Petersburg, son-in-law of Viktor Zubkov

He headed the tax service and the Ministry of Defense. People associated with him profited from fraudulent schemes in the defense sector. In 2012, he fell from grace as a result of intrigues within Putin's inner circle. People close to Serdyukov, including his mistress, Yevgenia Vasilyeva, were arrested and convicted of corruption. Serdyukov himself escaped criminal prosecution, but has not held a prominent position since.

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Yuri Kovalchuk, Putin's neighbor in the Ozero cooperative

He became a billionaire and one of the most influential businessmen in the country, having acquired former state assets in insurance, finance, and media. He remains in Putin's inner circle.

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Mikhail Kovalchuk, Putin's acquaintance from St. Petersburg

He headed the Kurchatov Institute, Russia's largest nuclear energy research center. He was a contender for the post of head of the Russian Academy of Sciences, but failed to be elected head of the Academy. Thanks to his brother, he remains in Putin's inner circle.

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Vladimir Smirnov, Putin's neighbor in the Ozero cooperative

He worked for companies associated with the Russian nuclear program. At some point in his career, he moved to Germany, where he and his family members currently run a diversified business. According to an acquaintance, he distanced himself from Putin and his former neighbors in the "Ozero" cooperative.

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Sergei Fursenko, Putin's neighbor in the Ozero cooperative

He held key positions in energy and media companies. He managed Russian football. He is now in "honorary retirement" as one of Gazprombank's deputy heads.

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Andrei Fursenko, Putin's neighbor in the Ozero cooperative

He was the Minister of Science and Education. He lost his ministerial post in 2012, and since then has held the position of presidential aide.

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Nikolai Shamalov, Putin's neighbor in the Ozero cooperative

He acquired valuable business assets linked to Putin. Shamalov's sons made meteoric careers in state-affiliated companies. His youngest son, Kirill, married Putin's youngest daughter, Katerina. Following Kirill's divorce from Katerina Tikhonova (Putina) in 2018, the Shamalov family lost most of their assets—shares in Bank Rossiya and the chemical company Sibur. Their influence within Putin's inner circle was greatly weakened, although all members of the Shamalov clan remained very wealthy.

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Vladimir Kozhin, a Komsomol activist from Leningrad

He became head of the Presidential Property Management Department (PPD), a wealthy and secretive structure that provided for the country's top leadership. Associated with him built a network of companies that profited from government contracts. He lost his post as head of the PPD in 2014; his family is now engaged in private business, and Kozhin himself sits in the Federation Council. One of the reasons for his resignation was that "Chekists"—former members of President Putin's personal security detail—were vying for Kozhin's position in the PPD.

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Taimuraz Bolloev, a prominent St. Petersburg businessman and president of the Baltika brewery, has known Putin since the early 1990s. Under Putin as president, he branched out from the beer

business into clothing. His companies received state contracts to make uniforms for law enforcement agencies. Bolloev boasted that he and Putin shared a love of judo and the banya, among other things. At the height of his government career, he served as head of the state-owned company Olimpstroy, which was preparing for the Sochi Olympics. In 2011, he lost his position as head of Olimpstroy. Reports indicated that this was due to a conflict.

with another member of Putin's inner circle.

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Dmitry Kozak, a native of Ukraine, served in the GRU special forces and studied at the same university as Putin, the law department of Leningrad University.
aunt

He worked with Putin, first in the St. Petersburg mayor's office and then at the federal level, overseeing a wide variety of, but never critical, areas. He was involved in several conflicts within Putin's inner circle, but these did not significantly impact his career. He currently oversees the Ukrainian issue in the presidential administration, although all the most important decisions on this topic are made not by him, but by Putin personally in his company.

with security forces.

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Sergei Pugachev, a businessman who started out as a currency dealer in Leningrad in the 1980s,

achieved financial and political success even before Putin came to power. Pugachev has repeatedly claimed to have played a key role in Putin's accession to the throne. However, other eyewitnesses to the events of 1999–2000 say815 that Pugachev greatly exaggerates his importance. In any case, during Putin's first two terms, he achieved significant growth in his business, in part thanks to the Kremlin's favor. He also became a senator. He fell into disgrace by 2010 and left Russia, where criminal cases were initiated against him. He likely went abroad.

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An assassination attempt was being prepared against Pugachev, which he suspects the Russian authorities of orchestrating. The cause of his fall from grace and the ensuing problems was his conflict with several people in Putin's circle, as well as his excessive public activity (after leaving Russia, he liked to give interviews in which he boasted of his acquaintance with Putin816). According to the Russian authorities, Pugachev stole money from his own bank.

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Alexander Bastrykin, Putin's classmate and the head of his university group

He was called to work in Moscow in 2006. Journalists have proven that crime boss Gennady Petrov, one of the leaders of the St. Petersburg underworld, played a key role in Bastrykin's advancement in the capital.817 Petrov, as wiretapped telephone conversations by the Spanish authorities revealed, orchestrated Bastrykin's appointment to the post of Deputy Prosecutor General. Bastrykin later headed the Investigative Committee, which was separate from the Prosecutor's Office. He personally investigated many political cases. Although he continues to work as Russia's chief investigator,

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He lost a significant amount of influence, partly because he had been in conflict for years with another prosecutor in Putin's inner circle—

Yuri Chaika (Chaika caught Putin's eye back in 1999, when he helped prosecute his then-boss, Yuri Skuratov, the Prosecutor General, who was caught committing adultery. Chaika later became Prosecutor General himself). And partly because Bastrykin stands out from the crowd of Putin's courtiers with his eccentricity. He periodically comes up with absurd initiatives, drinks heavily, and in his spare time writes bad poetry under a pseudonym and censors a Wikipedia article about himself.818 It 's also worth noting that Putin has an almost pathological fear of prosecutors (none of the Prosecutor Generals has risen higher in the career ladder under Putin, and the Prosecutor General's Office itself has been stripped of some important functions).

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NOTES

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[1] A criminal case against Yuri Skuratov was opened based on the testimony of call girls / Gazeta.Ru, April 2, 1999.

[2] Interview with the authors, 2022

[3] Here and below is a series of interviews with the authors, 2016–2024

[4] Andrei Mozzhukhin. "I invited Putin to the Kremlin." Former head of the Presidential Property Management Department Pavel Borodin on his work in the 1990s / Lenta.ru, December 8, 2015. A special expert

[5] will be charged with the moral character of the Prosecutor General. nal commission / Lenta.Ru, March 18, 1999

[6] For example: Alexander Kabakov. The prosecutor forged- nyy! / Kommersant. Vlast, April 27, 1999.

[7] Body-licking / Kommersant. Vlast, December 24, 2007

[8] The chronology is based on Putin's official biography, which, however, still raises questions among researchers, including the authors of this book.

[9] For example: Igor Shadkhan. Power / YouTube, 1991

[10] Interview with the authors, 2024

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[11] Oleg Kalugin's 2012 interview on the program "Visiting Dmitry Gordon" / YouTube channel "Visiting Gordon", August 12, 2023

[12] Catherine Belton. Putin’s People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West, 2020 ÿ.

[13] Here and below are quotes from Yakunin's interview with the authors. in the fall of 2020

[14] Photos of Yakunin's house appeared on the yaplakal.com community and were later deleted. Alexei Navalny confirmed the authenticity of the photos. See: Yakunin's Dacha / Navalny's LiveJournal blog, June 1, 2013.

[15] Sergei Stankevich. "Yeltsin was a great intuitive" / Vzglyad, February 1, 2011. It should be noted that Stankevich was Yeltsin's advisor until 1993, but by 1996 he had become an active supporter of Sobchak.

[16] Then-Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov recalled. Ksenia Sobchak, Vera Krichevskaya, documentary "The Sobchak Case," 2018.

[17] Catherine Belton. Putin’s People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West, 2020 ÿ.

[18] For example: Arsen Rstaki, Sergey Borisov. Case Pu-
Tina / Novaya Gazeta, March 23, 2000

[19] The timestamp on the video says it was recorded in January 1998. However, the video, as it later turns out,

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Most likely, it was edited from several authentic tapes. The women captured on the recording claimed that Skuratov used their services in 1997–1998.

[20] Interview with the authors by a former member of Yeltsin's team, 2022

[21] Interview with the authors, 2020

[22] Interview with the authors of the former State Duma deputy, who participated in the Skuratov case, 2022

[23] Putin's resentment was described, citing a source, in Catherine Belton's book. See: Catherine Belton, Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West, 2020.

[24] His son, in particular, now works as the general director of the Tsargrad TV channel, which is owned by the pro-Putin oligarch Konstantin Malofeev.

[25] Interview with the authors, 2020

[26] A later reflection of these rumors can be found, for example, in an interview with Yeltsin's former chief of security, Alexander Korzhakov, given in 2007 on the program "Visiting Dmitry Gordon" / YouTube channel "Visiting Gordon", 2014.

[27] The version about the possible poisoning of Sobchak by the special services was mentioned, among other things, in the book by the publicist Arkady Vaksberg ("Poison Laboratory. From Lenin to

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Putin, 2007), and was later reproduced in Masha Gessen’s biography of Putin (The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin, 2012).

[28] For example: Viktor Rezunkov. The Death of Anatoly Sobchak – A Mystery Remains / Radio Liberty, February 21, 2015.

[29] Vasily Kabachinov, head of the Finance Ministry's Audit Department in St. Petersburg, died in a bathhouse fire in the fall of 1999. Oleg Kalinichenko, an operative with the St. Petersburg Main Directorate of Internal Affairs' anti-corruption department, resigned from the agency and joined a monastery, according to Novaya Gazeta. See: Criminal cases involving Vladimir Putin explain the President's personnel policy / Novaya Gazeta, October 3, 2005.

[30] “His life - probably, unfortunately - is in no way connected with any family relationships, it is connected only with those duties, with that responsibility

“the responsibility he bears as head of state,” the president’s press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, told Ekho Moskvy on June 7, 2013.

[31] Moral Authorities / fom.ru, September 24, 2014

[32] Zhyromskaya V. B. Attitude of the population to religion: based on the 1937 census. Proceedings of the Institute of Russian History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2000.

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[33] Except for Tikhon's short patriarchate between the February Revolution and 1925. For a significant part of this time, Patriarch Tikhon was under investigation.

[34] “Some people are scared by the all-powerful special services, and others are scared by "Corruption, theft." Interview with former head of the KGB of the RSFSR Viktor Ivanenko / Ogonyok, September 6, 2016.

[35] Grigoriev / Our Version on the Neva, October 25, 2010

[36] Members of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR's parliamentary commission, including Father Gleb Yakunin, were granted temporary access to the archives. Articles about the deputies' findings were published in the Russian press in 1991–1992, including in the newspaper Argumenty i Fakty.

[37] For example: Alexy II – a KGB agent nicknamed "Drozdov"? / Novaya Gazeta, October 13, 1998; Sylvain Besson, Bernhard Odehnal. Putin's Patriarch war Spion in der Schweiz / SonntagsZeitung, February 4, 2023, and many others publications.

[38] His nickname likely derives from the secular name of the 19th-century Russian Metropolitan Filaret—Vasily Drozdov. Alexy II, while still a student at the Theological Academy, wrote a dissertation on Drozdov and always rated him highly.

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[39] Natalia Gevorkyan, Andrei Kolesnikov, Natalia Timakova. First-Person Conversations with Vladimir Putin, 2000

[40] Ibid. For example, Putin recalled that he began to rethink the war in Afghanistan thanks to Grigoriev's stories.

[41] Ekaterina Kochergina. Religiosity / Levada Center, July 18, 2017

[42] Pavel Koshelev (Korshunov), then an officer in the KGB's Fifth Directorate in Leningrad, later recalled with indignation that "foreign radio stations like Radio Liberty, the BBC, and Voice of America reported on this protest in every possible way," meaning the KGB considered it a matter of honor to find the perpetrators of the sedition. See: Pavel Koshelev. Investigation with Consequences / proza.ru, March 25, 2023.

[43] The KGB also had investigative powers.

[44] The article lists two authors: Georgy Molotkov and Leonid Orlov. As Meylakh told the authors of this book, he and the Zvezda staff knew that investigator Cherkesov was behind one of the pseudonyms.

[45] Natalia Gevorkyan, Andrei Kolesnikov, Natalia Timakova. First-Person Conversations with Vladimir Putin, 2000

[46] Interview with the authors, 2021

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[47] Some of our other interlocutors, including Yurov, say that they have not heard such a story and
there is doubt about its authenticity.

[48] Interview with the authors, 2022

[49] In particular, Olga Grigorieva owned a significant stake in Stroygazconsulting, one of the largest contractors for state-owned Gazprom (it was later revealed that Alexey Miller, Putin's secretary and subordinate, who was appointed head of Gazprom in 2001, also secretly owned a stake in Stroygazconsulting). Grigorieva also held a stake in the construction company LSR, which belongs to the stepson of Putin's former colleague from Leningrad University.

[50] This is what a former Kremlin official told the authors.

[51] Mikhail Rubin, Olga Churakova. Iron Masks. Part 3 / Project, December 9, 2020

[52] Interview with the authors, 2020

[53] Interview with the authors by a former student of Fursenko, 2021

[54] From here on about Kovalchuk – a series of interviews with author-frames, 2019.

[55] “I decided that these were contraceptives that were hung up,” Putin said during the "Direct Line" / Conversation with Vladimir Putin. Continued, December 15, 2011

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[56] Sasha Sulim. The Russian Academy of Sciences presidential election has been postponed until the fall. What do Vladimir Putin and Mikhail Kovalchuk have to do with it? / Meduza, March 22, 2017.

[57] Interview with the authors, 2015

[58] Calculations were made by the publication "Project" as of 2019.

[59] In the case of Kizhi, part of the money also went to the state, since the temples on the island are also a state museum-reserve.

[60] All ratings for "RBC Investigation: What the Church Lives On" / RBC, February 24, 2016

[61] The topic of duty-free import of cigarettes and alcohol was the subject of numerous newspaper articles, some of which were later contested by the Church in court and ultimately expunged from public view. The most comprehensive study of this topic was by Moskovsky Komsomolets journalist Sergei Bychkov. His most famous article is: Sergei Bychkov. "Tobacco Metropolitan" / Moskovsky Komsomolets, February 18, 1997.

[62] Igor Tolokonnikov. Investigation: Traders in the Temple. Church Business: With God's Help and Humanitarian Aid / Kommersant. Vlast, October 8, 1996.

[63] REVELATION — “I light the Holy Fire” (part 2) / YouTube-Holy Fire Channel - The Truth, March 15, 2022

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[64] Interview with the authors, 2020

[65] The President. Film by Vladimir Solovyov / Russia-1, April 26, 2015

[66] Interview with the authors, 2019

[67] Interview with the authors, 2021

[68] Elena Berezanskaya, Igor Popov, Ivan Vasiliev, Mak-Sim Tovkaylo. The President's Mistake / Forbes, 2014

[69] Ibid.

[70] Interview with the authors, 2021

[71] Roman Badanin, Ivan Osipov. "A Minority Shareholder from God: Konstantin Malofeev's Journey from Wealth to Raid" / Forbes, November 20, 2012

[72] Interview with the authors, 2021

[73] Putin's statement at the plenary session of the 26th St. Petersburg International Economic Forum / kremlin.ru, June 16, 2023

[74] The story is based on an interview.
two eyewitnesses of the events, 2018–2023

[75] From the correspondence of the deputy head of the Kremlin's department for domestic policy, Timur Prokopenko, published by the hacker group "Anonymous International" in 2015. The word "Yid" was used in a message to the official by propagandist Anastasia Kashevarova,

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She later became the press secretary for State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin, a presenter on Channel One, and deputy head of the pro-Kremlin LDPR party's staff.

[76] From here on, about Usvyatsov and his colleagues—Roman Badanin, Maria Zholobova, Daria Zhuk, Nikolai Kovalkov . Their struggle. St. Petersburg. Episode two / Dozhd, December 13, 2017.

[77] In particular, wrestlers Nikolai Vashchilin and Petr Tarkhanov, who trained with Putin, told the authors about this.

[78] Mikhail Rostovsky, Sergei Bychkov, Ekaterina Deeva, Maria Markina, Irina Bobrova, Alexander Khinshtein. Seven Moments in the Life of the "Successor" / Moskovsky Komsomolets, August 18, 1999.

[79] Roman Badanin, Maria Zholobova, Daria Zhuk, Nikolai Kovalkov. Their Struggle. St. Petersburg. Episode Two / Rain, December 13, 2017.

[80] Three of Rotenberg's acquaintances and relatives told us this, and it also follows from a record discovered by us and our co-authors in the Central Register of Foreigners of the Federal Republic of Germany, 2017–2020.

[81] Roman Badanin, Maria Zholobova, Daria Zhuk, Nikolai Kovalkov. Their Struggle. St. Petersburg. Episode Two / Rain, December 13, 2017.

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[82] Demid Momot. Black belt, 2010.

[83] Interview with the authors, 2021

[84] Interview with the authors, 2021

[85] Interview with the authors, 2021

[86] Luke Harding. Mafia state, 2011 ÿ.

[87] Sergey Kanev, Anastasia Gorshkova. "Putin's Massager's Fingers" / Investigation Management Center, January 19, 2018

[88] The story of Gunvor and its enrichment from the collapse of Yukos is described, for example, here: Jack Farchy, Javier Blas. The World for Sale: Money, Power, and the Traders Who Bartered the Earth's Resources, 2022.

[89] Interviews with two former Yukos managers, 2019–2021.

[90] From here on, the story about Tsepov is based, among other things, on a series of interviews with the authors of three sources, 2013–2022

[91] Kirill Metelev. Roman Tsepov: "There were no assassination attempts on Putin in my presence..." / Gorod, March 27, 2003.

[92] From here on about the circumstances of the death and investigation vaniya - including on the basis of an interview with the authors of a close friend of Tsepov, 2023.

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[93] Interview with the authors, 2021

[94] For example: Vladislav Maltsev. Pussy Riot do not confess and do not repent / Nezavisimaya Gazeta, March 12, 2012. The Kremlin behaved strangely during the musicians' trial, as if confirming the theory of Putin's personal involvement in the case. Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, immediately reported that the then prime minister was aware of
The group's performance and has a "negative" attitude toward it. Then Putin himself suddenly suggested that Pussy Riot deserved leniency. And then, on the contrary, he approved of their harsh sentence, accompanying it with the mocking phrase that became famous: "The court gave them a two-year sentence."

[95] Interview with the authors, 2022

[96] Author Interview Series, 2021–2022

[97] Interview with the authors, 2022

[98] In the version of a former high-ranking official
Kremlin. Interview with the authors, 2015

[99] Pavel Korobov. Peace to the Nations, Land to Christians / Kommersant, February 24, 2009. This refers to the Federal Law of November 30, 2010 “On the Transfer of Religious
"to organizations of religious property owned by the state or municipality," which has been working, albeit slowly, ever since.

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100Interviews with the Authors, 2021 The story below is retold from the words of the art critic himself, who asked for an an-
nimnosti.

101Interviews with the Authors, 2022

102Nikolai Mitrokhin. Entertaining Patriarchology / Grani.ru, April 9, 2012

103The number is given according to statistics of Jehovah's Witnesses for the official website of the church in Russia / jw-russia.org/prisoners

104This is Father John Kurmoyarov, sentenced to three years in prison by a St. Petersburg court in 2023. The cruel irony is that in Ukraine, where Kurmoyarov previously lived, he was persecuted for displaying the St. George's ribbon. 105A Russian Orthodox Church priest exorcises a computer demon and the Prince
of Darkness, Eiphone / YouTube, 2019

106 Tikhon Shevkunov. Nikolai Leonov. In memoriam / Orthodoxy.Ru, April 28, 2022

107Moscow bids farewell to General Leonov / Stole-tie, April 29, 2022

108Interview with the authors, 2018

109 Tikhon (Shevkunov), Archimandrite: "Putin and his family are Christians. That's the main thing" / Izvestia, December 7, 2001.

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110Maria Zholobova. A God-Given Propagandist / Important Stories, August 1, 2022

111Interview with the authors, 2017

112Interview with the authors, 2017

113Interview with the authors of a presidential acquaintance, 2022

114Interview with the authors, 2023

115Interview with one of the authors, 2019

116Interview with the authors, 2018

117Speech of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill before the funeral service of Schema-Archimandrite Iliy (Nozdrin) / YouTube, 2025

118Interview with the authors, 2019

119The president's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, confessed to the authors in 2019.

120Interview with the authors, 2019

[121] Speech by Ilya Nozdrin in the St. Catherine's Cathedral in Kras-Nodara, February 28, 2018

122Interview with the authors of a familiar patriarch, 2021

123Attitude towards the Russian Orthodox Church and the Patriarch / fom.ru, April 19, 2022

124Portrait of a Putinist / The New Times, April 27, 2012

125Interviews with the authors, 2021

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126Putin. Film by Andrey Kondrashov / Russia-1, 2018

[127] Two sources familiar with this group told the story (interviews with the authors, 2018–2022). This story is also described in Mikhail Zygar's book, All the Kremlin's Men: A Brief History of Modern Russia (2015).

128Interview with the authors of Fradkov's acquaintance, 2024

[129] Zubkov was an "absentee" member of the cooperative. He didn't have a dacha, but he used his official position to help Putin's other friends get one.
land.

130Viktor Cherkesov. We must not allow warriors to turn into traders / Kommersant, October 9, 2007.

[131] Roman Shleynov. "Special Control for Furniture." Investigations / Novaya Gazeta, November 1, 2004.

132Interview with the authors, 2020

133Interview with the authors, 2020

134Interview with the authors, 2024

135Interview with the authors by Ivanov's former colleague, 2023

136The question of President Medvedev's independence
still causes controversy among his supporters and opponents. The former point out that he decided to support the West, contrary to Putin's opinion.

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in the fight against Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Others note that Medvedev failed to carry out a single real reform—for example, the reform of the security forces amounted to a formal renaming of the militia to the police. We will touch on Medvedev's fate later.

maiden in subsequent chapters.

137Interview with one of the authors, 2013

[138] This is how our interlocutor in United Russia recalled this story in 2014.

139One of the authors of the book witnessed this episode, 2014.

140Interview with the authors, 2015

141Interview with the authors, 2021

142Interview with the authors, 2022

Ksenia Dokukina, Irina Malkova, Igor Popov, Yulia Kotova. A Canceled Sensation: How the Head of Russian Railways Was Fired / Forbes, June 19, 2013

[144] Russian hackers were behind the "dismissal" of Russian Railways head Yakunin / Forbes, December 11, 2013

145The upper house of the Russian parliament, the Federation Council, is formed from representatives of the regions,
than a senator must live the last five years in the territory he represents. But in practice, this rule often does not work. Yakunin should have

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put the Kaliningrad region, where he never lived. And Putin took advantage of the loophole - he provided
he was given the rank of ambassador, since security officials and diplomats have the right to bypass this peculiar “residence requirement.”

[146] "Health Session" by Anatoly Kashpirovsky
YouTube, October 8, 1989

Anatoly Kashpirovsky's 2001 interview on the program "Visiting Dmitry Gordon" / YouTube channel "Visiting Gordon," April 16, 2016. In that interview, he did not claim to have hypnotized Basayev. However, photographer Vladimir Mashin, who filmed the conversation between the hypnotist and the terrorist, told The Insider that Kashpirovsky told him he had given Basayev a powerful "directive."

[148] Elena Svetova. Nostradamus in Uniform: An Interview with Georgy Rogozin / Top Secret, April 1, 1999.

149Interview with Viktor Zolotov in the documentary film by Ksenia Sobchak and Vera Krichevskaya “The Sobchak Case”, 2018

[150] Guest: Kirsan Ilyumzhinov. Posner / Channel One, April 27, 2010.

[151] Evgeny Savchenko. Shock…, 2021

152Interviews with the authors, 2021

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153Alexey Nepriyatel. Abstract of the dissertation "Procurement, Preservation, and Processing of Antler Reindeer Products", 2011.

154Interview with the authors, 2020

155 "Based on the conversation between Itogi's correspondent and Viktor Ivanovich [Petrik], one can conclude that he dedicated these seven years to serving his country in the ranks of the KGB. At the very least, he himself said that he solved three very important problems for the USSR, and he still has a watch given to him by Daniil Nosyrev, head of the KGB Directorate for Leningrad and the Leningrad Region from 1969 to 1987." See: Vladimir Kryuchkov. Inventor / Itogi, May 24, 2010.

156 "Mr. V. I. Petrik's activities lie not in the realm of science, but in the realm of business and invention," is the main conclusion of the report published on April 21, 2010, by a Russian Academy of Sciences commission chaired by Academician Vladimir Tartakovsky.
157Yuri Ryashentsev. Abortion: An

Evolutionary Catastrophe / Penza Medical Portal, July 31, 2009.

158 From here on we are talking about publications in the journal "Legal Science: History and Modernity."

159Irina Iordanov. "He was made a fool of": Deputy Ananskikh claimed he didn't write an article about reptilians.

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Gazeta.Ru, December 18, 2023. "My hair stood on end everywhere," is how Ananskikh described his impressions of the publications. The journal "Legal Science: History and Modernity" removed the article and published
rejoiced at the apology to the deputy.

[160] Religious beliefs / Levada Center, May 16, 2023

161Faith and Superstition / Levada Center, November 16, 2017

[162] Here and below is a series of interviews with the authors, 2016–2023

163 Besik Pipia. How Vladimir Putin Strolled in an Erotic Club / Nezavisimaya Gazeta, October 14, 2002.

164Interview with the authors, 2023

165Interview with the authors, 2023

166Natalia Gevorkyan, Andrei Kolesnikov, Natalia Timakova. First-Person Conversations with Vladimir Putin, 2000

167Irina Bobrova. Putin in a Stirlitz costume / Moskovsky Komsomolets, December 29, 2001.

168Mikhail Rostovsky, Sergei Bychkov, Ekaterina Deeva, Maria Markina, Irina Bobrova, Alexander Khinshtein. Seven Moments from the Life of the "Successor" / Moskovsky Komsomolets, August 18, 1999.

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169Oleg Blotsky. Vladimir Putin. Life Story, 2001

170 Ibid.

171 Ibid.

172Irene Pitch. A Piquant Friendship: My Friend Lyudmila Putina, Her Family, and Other Comrades, 2002

173Interview with the authors, 2022

Andrey Zakharov, Roman Badanin, Mikhail Rubin. Iron Masks. Part 2 / Project, November 25, 2020

175 Ibid.

176 Ibid.

177 Ibid.

178 Pitch herself spoke. See here: Roman Badanin, Mikhail Rubin. Iron Masks. Anniversary Issue / Project, October 7, 2022.

Andrey Zakharov, Roman Badanin, Mikhail Rubin. Iron Masks. Part 2 / Project, November 25, 2020

180 The films in question are "On the Road" and "The President's Classmates," which were commissioned by state television channels but never aired. In the first film, train passengers discuss the situation in the country; in the second, graduates of St. Petersburg School No. 281, the school Putin attended, discuss the situation. An unenviable fate

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Two other films created by or starring Shadkhan also awaited. The 2002 film "Evening Conversation" was shown only once and then forgotten. And the 2005 film "Your High Loneliness" (starring Shadkhan), produced by Moscow television, led to the dismissal of the channel's director—right on the day of its screening, between the second and third episodes. Naturally, the film was also banned.

181Interview with the authors, 2020

182Federal State Statistics Service / Birth rate, mortality and natural population growth / rosstat.gov.ru.

[183] Ibid.

Anna Boytsova, Irina Iordanova. "Straight from School." Murashko Urged to Think About Having Children Early / Gazeta.Ru, July 18, 2023.

[185] Thomas Grove, Steve Gutterman. Gays in Russia Fear More Attacks After Volgograd Murder / Reuters, May 13, 2013.

186The corresponding correction from June 30, 2013 can still be found in Wikipedia's edit history.

[187] Elena Milashina. Honor Killing / Novaya Gazeta, April 1, 2017

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[188] For equal rights for gays / Levada Center, May 23, 2019

189On Zhirinovsky's homosexuality, see also: David Tuller. Cracks in the Iron Closet: Travels in Gay and Lesbian Russia, 1996.

190For example, here: Zhirinovsky swims in a pool with young activists / YouTube, August 12, 2017.

[191] Here and further about Zhirinovsky: Yulia Lukyanova, Roman Badanin, Mikhail Rubin. CJSC Party / Project, March 1, 2019

192The court rejected Zhirinovsky's lawsuit against journalist Davletgildeev and the Dozhd TV channel, who reported on his harassment / Current Time, February 8, 2022

Zhirinovsky regretted getting married and rated his life as a C / Izvestia, August 7, 2020

194Sergey Smirnov, Olga Churakova. BBC journalist reports recording of harassment by MP Slutsky / Vedomosti, March 6, 2018

Alina Didkovskaya, Olga Churakova. The State Duma Ethics Committee found no violations in the behavior of Deputy Slutsky / Vedomosti, March 21, 2018.

196Interviews with authors, 2016–2019

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[197] E. Mizulina denied plans to ban the Bible and oral sex / RBC, June 17, 2013

[198] Ekaterina Reznikova, Mikhail Rubin. The Book of Nothingness Project, October 15, 2024

Angelina Grigoryan. LGBT activists are being used to discredit Russian officials / Izvestia, November 18, 2015.

200Interview with LGBT activist and journalist Renat Davletgildeev. Volodin is not gay! How officials delete incriminating evidence against themselves from the internet / YouTube channel "Khodorkovsky LIVE", October 16, 2024. 201Lev Ivanov, Andrei Polunin. Viktor

Shenderovich, Alexander Potkin, and Eduard Limonov found themselves involved in a sex scandal / Free Press, April 22, 2010.

The story below is told based on interviews with at least ten sources, as well as material evidence—photographs and video recordings. Our colleague and co-author Katya Arenina played a major role in the development of this episode.

203Based on a petition for reconciliation. 204Which she herself admits to in an

interview. See: Lyudmila Ivanova: There Was No Sex in the USSR. There Was Love / Metro St. Petersburg, November 20, 2010.

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205 Songs about the Main Thing / Novaya Gazeta, May 23, 2005

206 Julia Barton. Russian songwriter feeds pro-, anti-Putin crowds / WRLN, October 6, 2015

207Interview with the authors, 2022

208Mikhail Rostovsky, Sergei Bychkov, Ekaterina Deeva, Maria Markina, Irina Bobrova, Alexander Khinshtein. Seven Moments from the Life of the "Successor" / Moskovsky Komsomolets, August 18, 1999.

209Interview with the authors, 2024

210For example: Vladimir Putin spent Christmas in Suzdal / RIA Novosti, January 7, 2004.

211 Putin gone wild: Russia abuzz over pics of shirtless leader / The Associated Press, August 22, 2007

212The authors of the Putin calendar deny any connection with Nashi / BBC News Russian Service, October 6, 2010

213The episode narrated below has been reconstructed on the basis of a series of conversations with four of its direct participants in 2018–2024.

214 "Nashi" are suing European media for comparison with the Hitler Youth / Pravo.ru, October 26, 2009

215Representatives of the Nashi movement are similar to Chinese Red Guards / Vedomosti, October 2, 2009.

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216Bloggers caught Vasily Yakemenko, the founder of the Nashi movement, having sex with minors / NewsRu.com, August 25, 2010

217Alexander Yunashev. Vladimir Putin appreciated the gifts from female students / Life, October 8, 2010.

218Putin hopes that the Moscow State University students who posed for erotic calendar, will not become victims of university pressure / Zaks.Ru, October 13, 2010

219Interview with the authors, 2024

220Interview with the authors, 2024

221Interview with the authors, 2024

222Interview with the authors, 2024

223 Stephen Grey, Jack Stubbs. The property manager and Putin's friends / Reuters, 31 ÿÿÿÿÿ 2016 ÿ.

224Interview with the authors, 2023

Anastasia Panina. Alina Kabaeva's most beautiful elements: exceptional purity of line, flexibility, and a smile / Match TV, December 13, 2021

226Kabaeva's story is based on the article by Mikhail Maglov, Yulia Starostina, Roman Badanin, and Mikhail Rubin, "Iron Masks. The Final Season" / Project, February 28, 2023, as well as a series of additional interviews with the authors of sources involved in providing Kabaeva with leisure and everyday life, 2018-2023.

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227Real Estate Database — CIAN, March 2021

228Sergey Topol. Putin and Kabaeva are compatible on Trinity? / Moscow Correspondent, April 12, 2008

229Interview with the authors of this scheme, a direct participant, 2022.

230Interview with the authors, 2023

231Interview with the authors, 2023

232Interview with the authors, 2023

The episode about the Karavella swing club is described from the words of a former close friend of Rotenberg's who visited the establishment. Author interview, 2023.

234Alena Chichigina. New scandal with Evgenia Vasilyeva, a defendant in the Oboronservis case: she is accused of plagiarism / Komsomolskaya Pravda, October 15, 2014. A number of other sources claimed that Serdyukov's red slippers were found in the apartment during a search, but the minister was not wearing them. A source familiar with the incident insisted that the minister was acting

He was indeed present in the apartment when the authorities raided it, but they tried to hide this fact from the media. 235Interview with

one of the authors, 2008.

[236] We are talking about the Alina rhythmic gymnastics festival, which has been held since 2009 by the Heavenly Grace charity foundation, founded by Alina Kabaeva.

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237 Financial documents of Dialogue reviewed by the authors, 2024.

State Duma Deputy Anna Kuvychko and the Volgograd cadets. "Uncle Vova, we're with you!" / YouTube channel of the song's author, Vyacheslav Antonov, November 14, 2017.

Kuvychko's story is described, for example, here – Ivan Bogdanov. "A Woman Who Sings": Why Did Former State Duma Deputy Anna Kuvychko Become Deputy Mayor of Volgograd? / Volgograd-online, May 18, 2022

240The story of Irina Starygina (Markelova) is told from the words of two of her acquaintances and documents that the authors have become familiar with, 2022–2023.

241 The governor of Mari El threatened to "dig up the road." Before the elections / Meduza, September 8, 2015

242The Rise and Fall of Mari El Governor Leonid Markelov / 7x7, April 27, 2017

243The data are based on the "results of budget execution of the Republic of Mari El" for the specified years. Website of the Government of the Republic of Mari El.

244The Rise and Fall of Mari El Governor Leonid Markelov / 7x7, April 27, 2017

245National program "In the Family Circle".

246The data is based on the search results of Yandex Maps.

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247Interview with the authors, 2022

Igor Sechin divorced his wife Olga. The yacht "Holy Princess Olga" is now called "True Love" / Meduza, November 15, 2017.

249F is an ass, Igor Ivanovich / Baza, July 4, 2019

250Katya Arenina. Everyday Life and Customs of the P. Era / Project, June 1, 2023

[251] Ibid.

[252] The Big Lebowski, 1998 ÿ.

253Interview with the authors, 2020

254Masha Gessen, in particular, noted that in one of his school photos, the young Putin was wearing a watch—a rare and expensive accessory for teenagers of that time. Masha Gessen. The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin, 2012.

255Natalia Gevorkyan, Andrei Kolesnikov, Natalia Timakova. First-Person Conversations with Vladimir Putin, 2000

256According to Rosstat data for 2021, at least 3% of the population.

257Oleg Blotsky. Vladimir Putin, 2003

[258] Ibid.

[259] Ibid.

260Oleg Blotsky. Vladimir Putin, 2003

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261The episode is reproduced based on the stories of three former Leningrad City Council deputies. Interviews with the authors, 2022–2024.

262Interview with the authors, 2023

263Oleg Blotsky. Vladimir Putin, 2003

264Interview with the authors, 2023

265The episode is reproduced based on an interview given by an acquaintance of the Sobchak family and real estate documents reviewed by the authors, 2023.

266Andrushchenko: “Putin told me: ‘Stepanych, we need to make money’” / Current Time, August 24, 2015

267Irene Pitch. A Piquant Friendship: My Friend Lyudmila Putina, Her Family, and Other Comrades, 2002

268Putin's former partner on the tatami, Nikolai Vashchilin, recalled in an interview with one of the authors, 2016.

269Dmitry Volchek. I Refused to Play on That Team / Radio Liberty, February 20, 2016. Freidzon recounted these same facts to one of the book's authors in a series of interviews, 2016–2022.

270 ICIJ, Panama Papers, April 3, 2016.

271Marina Salye: Why I Left for the Village / Radio Liberty, March 4, 2010

272A then colleague of Putin recalled in an interview with the authors, 2023.

Machine Translated by Google

273Direct Line with Vladimir Putin / kremlin.ru, June 15, 2017

274As the medical staff who cared for Putin Sr. recounted, Vladimir Spiridonovich, when greeting his son at the hospital, called him "the President of Russia." See: Nurse Olga Verbina: Putin's father and I shared a tender friendship / Komsomolskaya Pravda, December 13, 2001.

275Vladimir Putin. Life is such a simple and cruel thing / Russian Pioneer, April 30, 2015

During an interview with American director Oliver Stone for a film about himself, Putin showed his guest his office and a photograph of his father in a sailor cap. Putin said in English, "This is my father in Sevastopol, Crimea."

277Natalia Gevorkyan, Andrei Kolesnikov, Natalia Timakova. First-Person Conversations with Vladimir Putin, 2000

278For example, here are described documents endorsed by Putin in the last days of December 1991 and at the very beginning of January 1992: Marina Salye. Putin's Turn / Radio Liberty, February 29, 2012.

279Interview with the authors, 2023

[280] Yle, September 24, 2023

Machine Translated by Google

281Interview with the authors, 2023

282Interview with the authors, 2023

283For example, here are the memoirs of former Leningrad City Council deputies Marina Salye and Nikolai Andrushchenko: Viktor Rezunkov. Vladimir Putin: "Money needs to be made!" / Radio Liberty, July 31, 2015.

This version first appeared in a report from the US diplomatic mission in Tallinn. The American diplomatic emails were hacked and published by WikiLeaks in 2011.

285Irene Pitch. A Piquant Friendship: My Friend Lyudmila Putina, Her Family, and Other Comrades, 2002

286Igor Arkhipov. Going into Intelligence and Politics / Kommersant, September 14, 1996

287Interview with the authors, 2024

288Quoted from: Karen Dawisha. Putin's Kleptocracy, 2015.

289 Roman Badanin, Maria Zholobova, Nikolai Kovalkov, Daria Zhuk. Their struggle / Rain, December 13, 2017

290 German Diligensky. "The West" in Russian society in private consciousness, 2000

291Interview with the authors, 2021

292Interview of Chigirinsky with the authors, 2022

Machine Translated by Google

[293] Transcripts have been published, for example, here: Anastasia Kirilenko. The Russian Mafia Case: "Tolik," "Sasha," "Tsar" / The New Times, November 30, 2015.

[294] Yuri Skuratov mentioned this scale of spending in an interview with Catherine Belton. In his memoirs, Skuratov also cited smaller amounts—tens of thousands of dollars. Catherine Belton. Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West, 2020; Yuri Skuratov. Kremlin Contracts, 2012.

295Interview with the authors, 2023

296The Kremlin has completely wiped out the oligarchs / Kommersant, July 29, 2000

297Potanin and Putin met in person a month before the general reception for oligarchs, on June 29, 2000.

[298] Roman Kutuzov. Oligarchs / Forbes, October 20, 2010

299The Kremlin has completely wiped out the oligarchs / Kommersant, July 29, 2000

[300] David Leppard. Putin “courted with $50m yacht” / The Times, 6 ÿÿÿÿÿÿ 2011 ÿ.

301Details about the yacht are provided by: Daria Pylnova, Dmitry Shkrylev. Yachts for the President. Power and Money / Novaya Gazeta, May 30, 2005.

Machine Translated by Google

Larisa Kaftan. "Has the President Got a New Yacht, the Olympia, in Sochi?" / Komsomolskaya Pravda, August 27, 2002.

303Author Interview Series, 2017–2023

304 Rating based on: Karen Dawisha. Putin's Kleptocracy, 2015.

305A later Reuters investigation revealed. Stephen Gray, Jason Bush, Roman Anin. "Billion-dollar medical project helped fund 'Putin's palace' on the Black Sea" / Reuters, May 21, 2014.

306Karen Dawisha. Putin's Kleptocracy, 2015.

307Oligarchs in the Kremlin have been completely wiped out / Kommersant, July 29, 2000

308Crew member interview with the authors, 2024

309A series of interviews with authors by Chigirinsky, 2016–2024.

Alexey Pastushin, Irina Malkova. Suleiman Kerimov sold the Moskva Hotel to the owners of Gorbushkin Dvor / RBC, October 19, 2015.

Mikhail Maglov, Roman Badanin, Sergey Titov. Iron Masks. The Final Season. Part 1 / Project, February 28, 2023

A Palace for Putin: The Story of the Biggest Bribe / Alexey Navalny YouTube Channel, January 19, 2021

Machine Translated by Google

313Vitaly Soldatskikh, Mikhail Rubin. Everyday Life and Customs of the P. Era. Part 3 / Project, May 6, 2024

Anastasia Napalkova, Anna Levinskaya, Anna Derya-bina. Oyster farming to begin opposite "Putin's palace" near Gelendzhik / RBC, May 11, 2016.

315Quoted from the film: Richard Bilton. Putin's Secret Riches / BBC, January 25, 2016.

316Interview of Sergei Kolesnikov with Masha Gessen / Snob.Ru, June 22, 2011

317Interview with the authors, 2022 The same idea was repeated in private conversations by many officials of that time.

318 Oligarch Boris Berezovsky spoke publicly about this when he spoke with Putin about his future (Berezovsky's 2007 interview on the program "Visiting Dmitry Gordon" / YouTube channel "Visiting Gordon," October 8, 2021). Shalva Chigirinsky also repeated the Gazprom version (series of interviews with authors, 2016–2024).

319Maria Zholobova. Eighty-first. Portrait of Mikhail Shelomov, the president's nephew, owner of a billion dollars and a toilet the yard / Project, October 30, 2019.

320 Roman Badanin, Natalia Telegina, Nikolai Koval-kov. Dear Peter / Rain, September 26, 2016

Machine Translated by Google

321Denis Rebrov, Olga Mordyushenko. Gennady Timchenko to Share Gas with Partner / Kommersant, December

16, 2009. 322The story is based on the words of one of the concert organizers, interview with the authors, 2023.

Dmitry Medvedev's secret dacha / YouTube channel "Alexei Navalny", September 15, 2016

324Mikhail Maglov, Roman Badanin, Maria Pevchikh, Dmitry Suharev, Ivan Vasiliev. Miners / Project, June 16, 2022

[325] From here on, interviews with the authors, 2024.

326Primakov's speech to journalists on April 11, 2003

[327] Rice never publicly acknowledged uttering this phrase. However, leading US media outlets claim she did suggest it at a meeting. For example: Jim Hoagland, "Three Miscreants" / The Washington Post, April 12, 2003.

328Putin: Bush is my friend, but we meet to work / RIA Novosti, February 22, 2005

329By Mike Wallace. 60 Minutes / CBS, 8 ÿÿÿ 2005 ÿ.

330Quotes and indirect speech are taken from: Speech and discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy / kremlin.ru, February 10, 2007.

Machine Translated by Google

331Population survey. USA and Russia: new plans for the creation of a missile defense system / bd.fom.ru, June 21, 2007.

332U.S. Position in the World / Gallup, ÿÿÿÿ 2007 ÿ.

333Michael McFaul. From Cold War to Hot Peace: An Ameri-can Ambassador in Putin's Russia, 2018 ÿ.

334 Barack Obama's speech at a joint press conference after the signing of the Russian-American Treaty
The thief on the reduction and limitation of strategic offensive weapons in Prague / kremlin.ru, April 8, 2010

335Michael McFaul. From Cold War to Hot Peace: An Ameri-can Ambassador in Putin's Russia, 2018 ÿ.

336 Ibid.

337 Garry Kasparov. A Frank Conversation in "Spas-House" / kasparov.ru, March 11, 2011

338Maria-Luisa Tirmaste. "Did I think I would support the communists?" / Kommersant, March 11, 2011.

339Alexey Naumov, Elena Chernenko. "Our American Baydushka" / Kommersant, July 27, 2010

340 Evan Osnos. The Biden Agenda / The New Yorker, 20 Dec 2014 ÿ.

341Obama 's assistant Michael McFaul was at that meeting, and he described it in his book From

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Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin’s Russia, 2018 ÿ.

342The President's Address to the Federal Assembly / kremlin.ru, December 12, 2012

[343] The term was introduced into circulation by the former head of the Kremlin's internal policy department, Konstantin Kostin.

This episode is based on a Forbes magazine article, where one of the authors of this book worked at the time. Nadezhda Ivanitskaya, Ksenia Dokukina, Irina Malkova. "Nationalization of the Elite: How the Kremlin Forced Officials to Love the Motherland" / Forbes, April 17, 2013.

[345] This mocking formulation was used by the media at the time. For example: Yulia Petrova, Dmitry Dmitrienko. Navalny found Pekhtin had undeclared real estate in the US / Vedomosti, February 12, 2013.

346Alexei Navalny. Who lives in the castle? FBK evidence-says: Deputy Prime Minister Shuvalov rents elite London property from himself, July 23, 2015; Igor Shuvalov's Tsar-apartment costs as much as 600 ordinary apartments, which he laughed at, July 4, 2016; "My dog is comfortable in business class", July 14, 2016 / all on navalny.com

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[347] From here on out, this is a series of interviews with the authors, 2021–2024

[348] The details of this story are described in the book by Evgenia Pismennaya, “The Kudrin System: The History of the Key Economist of Putin’s Russia,” 2013.

[349] Irina Malkova, Nadezhda Ivanitskaya, Elizaveta Osetinskaya. Billionaire on Olympus: How Potanin Became the Main Private Investor in Sochi 2014 / Forbes, January 29, 2014

AFK Sistema will open two more four-star hotels in Sochi by 2026 / RIA Novosti, January 15, 2024.

[351] ONEXIM invests $300 million in the development of a ski resort / RBC, July 16, 2007

[352] Maksim Makarychev. Russia helped Prince Albert II of Monaco conquer the North Pole / Rossiyskaya Gazeta, April 18, 2006.

Albert's former intelligence adviser, Robert Eringer, later spoke about the prince's bribery. However, according to him, the boss didn't realize he was taking a bribe from Putin. See: Daria Zhuk, Maria Zholobova, Roman Badanin. How Putin "built" a dacha for the Prince of Monaco, who voted for Sochi to host the 2014 Games / Dozhd, April 21, 2018 .

Machine Translated by Google

354Interview with the authors, member of the Russian Olympic Committee, 2024

355Speech at the 119th session of the International Olympic Committee / kremlin.ru, July 4, 2007.

356The Russian Olympic Committee did not recognize the dolphin as the mascot of the 2014 Games / Lenta.ru, March 3, 2008

357Mikhail Malykhin. Leopard, bunny, and polar bear named Sochi 2014 mascots / Vedomosti, February 26, 2011

358D. Medvedev surprised by the results of the selection of the Olympic symbol / RBC, March 1, 2011

359Before 1918, these were indeed two regions - Kuban region and Black Sea province.

360Interview with the authors, 2023

361Interview with the authors, 2023

362This was previously described in a conversation with the authors by one of the former top officials, 2020.

363The circumstances of this yacht voyage were recalled in an interview with the authors by a leading Krasnodar businessman and politician, 2024.

364 Ibid.

365Interview with the authors, 2024

366Interview with the authors, 2024

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[367] Guest: Alexander Tkachev. Posner / Channel One, February 7, 2011.

368Alexey Belyanin. "Tkachev Agrocomplex" tops Forbes' list of the 20 largest landowners / Kommersant, March 30, 2022

369The episode of Judge Khakhaleva is based on interviews conducted by the authors with direct participants in the events (a Krasnodar politician and a functionary of the Supreme Court - 2019-2024), as well as documents studied by the authors and open data.

The $2 million wedding of Krasnodar judge Elena Khakhaleva's daughter has sparked outrage on social media / YouTube, July 16, 2017.

[371] A Sign of Respect: How Russians View Corruption / Levada Center, March 25, 2016

372More than half of Russians offer bribes / Interfax, September 15, 2009

373The former head of the Stavropol State Traffic Inspectorate denied guilt in creating an organized crime group and stated that he was being pressured / Stavropol News, February 5, 2024

374Interview with the authors, 2019

375Putin considers it unacceptable to leak unconfirmed information about Belyaninov to the media / TASS, December 23, 2016

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376Interview with one of the authors, 2024

377Mamishev's story is based on interviews with two of his acquaintances, 2024.

378Alexander Ermakov. Vagif Mamishev's Bloody Wrath / Fontanka, November 25, 2016

379Andrey Zakharov. To Smolny in a Blue Rolls-Royce / Fontanka, November 2, 2016.

380Castles in the sand / The Economist, 13 ÿÿÿÿ 2013 ÿ.

381Interview with the authors, 2023

382The rating is based on: Expensive road: they want to make the Adler-Krasnaya Polyana highway a toll road / RBC, August 15, 2019.

Alexandra Galaktionova. "Ran away from the construction site: why Gennady Timchenko is selling his construction assets" / RBC, July 28, 2015.

[384] From here on about Kondratiev - interview with the authors, 2024

The scheme was first described in 2015–2016 by Grigory Rodchenkov, the former head of the Anti-Doping Center, who fled Russia for the United States. Bryan Fogel. Icarus / Netflix, August 4, 2017.

386 Anna Gromova. "They are pursuing the goal of enrichment" Russia's Prosecutor General criticized the installation of traffic cameras / Gazeta.Ru, November 16, 2021

Machine Translated by Google

Andrey Mozzhukhin. "I invited Putin to the Kremlin." Former head of the Presidential Property Management Department Pavel Borodin on his work in the 1990s / Lenta.ru, December 8, 2015.

388 Ibid.

389Vladimir Popov, a former officer of the KGB's "dissident" headquarters, wrote about Glazunov's recruitment during the Soviet era in his memoirs, "Conspiracy of Scoundrels: Notes of a Former KGB Lieutenant Colonel" / gordonua.com, 2019.

Andrey Mozzhukhin. "I invited Putin to the Kremlin." Former head of the Presidential Property Management Department Pavel Borodin on his work in the 1990s / Lenta.Ru, December 8, 2015.

391Putin told this story at a meeting with students at the Sirius educational center / kremlin.ru, July 21, 2017.

392Interview with the authors, 2023

393For example: Andrey Vandenko. Jazz Time / Results, August 17, 2009.

394Natalia Vetlitskaya. A Fairy Tale (Caution: Uncensored, specially requested by radio listeners) / LiveJournal, 2011.

395Vetlitskaya calls him “a great artist,” not without specifying the name, but based on indirect evidence we can assume that we are talking specifically about Kirkorov.

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Alexei Navalny was the first to report on this FSO-registered object. See: Gazprom Pensioner / YouTube channel "Alexei Navalny," March 14, 2019.

397 Roman Badanin, Maria Tsvetkova, Alexey Levchenko, Svetlana Bocharova. Valdai Full House / Gazeta.Ru, November 20, 2009

Mikhail Rubin. Iron Masks. Part 3 / Project, December 9, 2020

Mikhail Maglov, Yuli Starostina, Roman Badanin, Mikhail Rubin. Iron Masks. The Final Season / Project, February 28, 2023

400Interviews with the authors, 2019

401Interview with the authors, 2022

402 Roman Badanin, Maria Zholobova, Evgenia Zobnina. Putin's Friends Revealed to Own the Villa from "Sherlock Holmes" / Dozhd, August 23, 2017.

403This was also confirmed in an interview with the authors by a practicing lawyer specializing in public law, 2024.

404Interview with the authors of a source who knows the details of the reconstruction of this apartment, 2024.

405List of representative offices of foreign states and honorary consuls / mid.ru, March 3, 2023

Machine Translated by Google

406Vitaly Soldatskikh, Mikhail Rubin. Everyday life and customs of the P era. Part 3. An investigation into how Vladimir Putin changed along with his palace / Project, May 6, 2024.

407Maria Tsvetkova. "We have a large business element," says Vladimir Kozhin, head of the Presidential Executive Office of the Russian Federation / Vedomosti, November 25, 2008.

408Interview with the authors, 2024

409Irina Bobrova. Putin in a Stirlitz costume / Moskovsky Komsomolets, December 29, 2001

410 Roman Badanin, Maria Zholobova, Daria Zhuk, Nikolai Kovalkov. Their Struggle. St. Petersburg. Episode Two / Dozhd, December 13, 2017. 411Vladimir Sudavny.

Letter from Putin / Pravda Severa, January 17, 2002.

412Putin. Film by Andrey Kondrashov / Russia-1, 2018

413Oleg Blotsky. Vladimir Putin, 2003

Putin. Film by Andrey Kondrashov / Russia-1, 2018

415Putin stated that Russia was “cheated” and “dumped” with the Minsk agreements / TASS, June 13, 2023

416ÿÿÿÿÿÿÿÿÿ: Steven Arthur Pinker. The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined, 2011 ÿ.

417 Russians don't trust law enforcement agencies / Levada Center, February 15, 2010

Machine Translated by Google

418Killings in Iraq: Find and Destroy! / wciom.ru, July 12, 2006

419Alexander Litvinenko, Yuri Felshtinsky. The FSB is blowing up Russia: The Federal Security Service — organizer of terrorist attacks, kidnappings and murders, 2002

420 Golden Mine, 1977

421Interview with the authors, 2024

422The story of Yuri Shutov is told based on interviews with six of his acquaintances, as well as documents and open data, 2022–2024.

423Andrey Benyukh, Mark Grigoriev. Fire at the Headquarters of the Revolution / Ogonyok, No. 12, March 1990.

424Alexander Nevzorov's program "600 seconds" / Channel Five, June 8, 1991

425A colleague of Nevzorov's on the set recalled this in a conversation with one of the book's authors, 2023.

426The 2007 documentary "Criminal Russia. The Great Confrontation" contains the account of investigator Alexander Shubov, to whom, according to him, Gimranov gave the described testimony "off the record." 427Alexander Nevzorov's program "600 Seconds" / Channel Five, February 24, 1991.

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The authors know of at least two such incidents, one of which resulted in a fatality. We are not disclosing the details of these incidents to protect the identities of our interviewees living in Russia.

429Yuri Shutov. Sobchak's Heart, or Notes of an Assistant to the One Who Went to Power. 1991; Sobchak's Swindler's Dyad, or How Everyone Was Robbed, 1994.

Nikolai Andrushchenko, a journalist sympathetic to Shutov, reported on Shutov's meeting with Putin at a Moscow hotel. Another person familiar with both Shutov and Putin suggested that the meeting may have taken place at the President Hotel on Yakimanka, where Putin sometimes informally received guests at the time.

[431] Jürgen Helfricht. Putin's secret Stasi ID card discovered / Bild, December 17, 2018

We reproduce this story, citing Shutov's own words, from the account of former Leningrad City Council deputy Andrei Korchagin, who lives in exile (interview with the authors, 2024). According to him, Shutov himself wrote to him about this episode. In October 1999, Putin did indeed visit Kresty, as numerous media reports have survived.

433Interview with the authors, 2024

434Interview with one of the authors, 2007

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435Anna Fedorova. Journalist Nikolai Andrushchenko died in hospital / Life, April 19, 2017.

436Collective pseudonym "A. Kirilenko." Lieutenant Colonel Putin illegally headed the FSB / "Legal"
St. Petersburg today, August 12, 1998

437Vladimir Esipov. Journalist beaten to death in St. Petersburg / Kommersant, August 26, 1998.

The episode with Manevich and Traber is told based on the words of four of their acquaintances. Interviews with the authors, 2023–2024.

439 Roman Badanin, Maria Zholobova, Nikolai Kovalkov, Daria Zhuk. St. Petersburg. Father and Son / Dozhd, August 24, 2017.

440Kumarin’s story is reconstructed based on interviews with three of his acquaintances, 2017–2020, open data and early publications.

441Burden of News / Rain, March 27, 2016

442Interview with the authors, 2017

443 Evgeny Vyshenkov. In Search of Kumarin's Seized Treasures. Chaika Valued Them More Than the Hermitage's, But They Disappeared / Fontanka, September 9, 2019.

444Interview with the authors, 2017

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445Dmitry Marakulin. Kidnapped children released free after intervention by influential businessman / Kommersant, July 3, 2007.

Vladimir Barsukov-Kumarin – Godfather of St. Petersburg. 2006. Part 1 / YouTube, April 23, 2019.

447 Ibid.

448The oil king of St. Petersburg was killed / Kommersant, July 27, 1999

449TV series "Gangster Petersburg", season 4, episode 5, 2003

450Dmitry Lomov. The Mystery of the "White Arrow" / Saratov News, December 2, 2001

451Kulikov accuses Lebedev. State Emergency Committee 4 / Kommersant, October 17, 1996.

452This version is presented, for example, in the book by Krasnoyarsk KGB veteran Evgeny Strigin, “The Interrupted Flight of Alexander Lebed,” 2005, as well as in many publications in national-patriotic media.

453Svetlana Pavlova. Viktor Ilyukhin: Death and Investigation / Radio Liberty, March 22, 2011

454These were people associated with Chechen separatists and disgraced businessman Boris Berezovsky.

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For example: Vladimir Pribylovsky, Yuri Felshtinsky. Death on the Rise. Chapter from the book "Operation Heir" / Saturday (Riga), June 27, 2004; Vakha Ibrahimov, "The Secret Biography of the President of Russia," 2000.

Even the state-owned Channel One television network admitted to the possibility of a terrorist attack. See: Well-known journalist Artem Borovik and prominent businessman Ziya Bazhaev died in a plane crash / ORT, March 9, 2000.

456Sergey Dyupin. Artem Borovik died because of a "bitch" / Kommersant, June 5, 2001.

457 From here on – interviews with the authors, 2024.

458 Evgeny Savostyanov. "I Shut Down the Communist Party of the Soviet Union," 2022.

459Some time later, Stepashin was sent to Moscow for a promotion, where he became deputy director of the future FSB, and then Minister of Internal Affairs (in this capacity, he visited Starovoitova's wounded aide). And the head of the St. Petersburg department for many years was Putin's KGB colleague, Viktor Cherkesov, a specialist in combating dissidents —the hero of the first chapters of this book.

460The episode was reconstructed based on an interview given by Patrushev's colleague to the authors (2024), as well as Sergei Stepashin's book "Go into Politics and Return," 2022.

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[461] This is how Sergei Stepashin described it in his memoirs, “Going into Politics and Returning,” 2022.

462For example: Vitaly Tseplyaev. "They want to turn Russia into Muscovy." Nikolai Patrushev on the West and Ukraine / Arguments and Facts, January 10, 2023.

463Interview of Oleg Kalugin by Natalia Gevorkyan / Kommersant. Vlast, April 2, 2002

[464] Ibid.

465Interview with the authors, 2024

[466] The general became the last person to be convicted in absentia under the Criminal Procedure Code of the RSFSR. Much later, in the new code, the Russian authorities again
they will return the possibility of trial and sentencing in absentia and will become apply this measure against new dissidents.

467Natalia Gevorkyan, Andrei Kolesnikov. Iron Putin / Kommersant, March 10, 2000

468The Karelian stage of the biography of Patrushev and his subordinates is reproduced on the basis of interviews with the authors of three people who encountered the Chekists at that time, 2023–2024.

469How long can a rope twist? / Kommersant, November 25, 1995

[470] Elena Ovcharenko. Leningrad character / Izvestia, June 15, 2007.

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471Dmitry Butrin, Boris Gorlin. "The award found the hero's relatives" / Kommersant, May 3, 2007.

472Interview with the authors, 2024

473 A series of interviews with authors, 2005–2022.

474 Author Interviews, 2023–2024

475Interview with the authors, 2024

476Author Interview Series, 2022–2024

477Interview with the authors, 2021

478Interviews with authors, 2019–2021

During Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, Oleg Markov oversaw personnel matters. He was the only one of his colleagues whose official biography makes no mention of the KGB or FSB. However, Markov, as two of his colleagues recalled, was also connected to the "office," where he ended up after graduating from the law department of Leningrad University with Putin. In the 1990s, Markov again found himself at Putin's side, on the mayor's committee for external relations. Then Markov, who, according to his recollections, bore

according to someone who knew him, he had a general's epaulettes and worked in customs and financial intelligence. But that's not it.
The most remarkable thing in the career of this "personnel officer" was that Markov had a terrible reputation in the St. Petersburg mayor's office. He regularly beat his own drivers if they

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His driving style didn't suit him for some reason. He also regularly scolded his subordinates with obscenities, and among other discipline tactics, he employed this: inviting an employee into his office, he would launch into a long tirade, which he wouldn't interrupt by going to his personal restroom to relieve himself, leaving the door ajar. And when petitioners entered the office, the official, following an old KGB habit, would turn up the television volume loudly—as a deterrent to eavesdropping.

480Interview with the authors, 2024

481FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev: If we “break down” and leave the Caucasus, the country will begin to collapse / Komsomolskaya Pravda, December 19, 2000

482The episode is described most fully here: Sergei Topol. "Alpha" shot to kill / Kommersant, December 23, 1997.

483 "Time" with Sergei Dorenko / ORT, December 20, 1997

484It later turned out that this was Savelyev's personal initiative, who arrived at the crime scene and made contact with the terrorist without even notifying his superiors (Alexey Filatov, People "A", 2019).

Mikhail Boltunov. Golden Stars of Alpha, 2009.

486Interview with the authors, 2024

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487Quoted from: Operation "Implementation" is complete! / Novaya Gazeta, August 29, 2004.

Andrey Soldatov, Irina Borogan. The New Nobility. Essays on the History of the FSB, 2010.

489The episode about Trepashkin, Litvinenko and the URPO is described based on interviews with three participants in the events, 2023–2024, documents, open data and media publications.

490Video of Litvinenko and other FSB agents speaking 10 years ago / YouTube-ÿÿÿÿÿ AP Archive, 21 ÿÿÿÿ 2015 ÿ.

491Interview with Marina Litvinenko and the authors, 2024

492At the same time, in the country’s main business newspaper — Kommersant published an open letter from Berezovsky to FSB chief Putin (November 13, 1998). In it, the businessman first emphasized his good personal relationship with Putin and then called on him to impartially investigate the criminal orders of his subordinates.

A close acquaintance of Khokholkov's, however, believes that it was not Khokholkov's unit, but the army, that ultimately played the main role in Dudayev's liquidation. Interview with the authors, 2024.

[494] Ekaterina Zapodinskaya. "They'll strangle us like puppies" / Kommersant, November 18, 1998.

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495Alexander Khinshtein. Provocateur Litvinenko / Moskovsky Komsomolets, November 10, 2000

496Author Interview Series, 2024–2025

Vladimir Popov. "A Conspiracy of Scoundrels: Notes of a Former KGB Lieutenant Colonel" / gordonua.com, chapters published beginning December 4, 2019.

498For example: Alexander Litvinenko's confession to his son three weeks before the poisoning: "I have big problems. I need to look for work, preferably in another country" / Izvestia, March 19, 2007.

499Let Them Talk / Channel One, March 20, 2018

Alexander Gusak: On Felix Dzerzhinsky's pipe, the Chekists, and his cell in Butyrka prison. Who is protected by the FSB? / YouTube, May 5, 2020

[501] From here on, regarding the official version of the explosions, the verdict of the Moscow City Court of January 12, 2004, in the case of Yusuf Krymshamkhalov and Adam Dekkushev.

502Traces of this version can be found, for example, here: John B. Dunlop. The Moscow Bombings of September 1999: Examinations of Russian Terrorist Attacks at the Onset of Vladimir Putin's Rule, 2014.

503Edward Lucas. The New Cold War: How the Kremlin Threatens Russia and the West, 2009

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504The following statements are quoted from the television program “Independent Investigation” / NTV, March 24, 2000.

505Novaya Gazeta, special issue, August 27, 2001

506Independent investigation / NTV, March 24, 2000

507Interviews with authors, 2023–2024

508Interview with the authors, 2024

509 Scott Anderson. Vladimir Putin's Dark Rise to Power / GQ, September 2009

510Veronica Chernysheva. "Dark Rise to Power" Is Not a Sensation in Russia / Nezavisimaya Gazeta, September 7, 2009.

511Igor Korolkov. A sketch of a not-so-fresh man / Moskovskie Novosti, November 11, 2003

512Alexander Zheglov. Witnesses Lost Confidence in the Evidence / Kommersant, December 2, 2004.

513Interview with the authors, 2024

514 From here on in the episode about Shchekochikhin, facts and quotes are cited from: Sergei Sokolov. We Put an End to It / Novaya Gazeta, July 3, 2013.

515Interview with the authors, 2023

516The estimate of 135–174 dead has been featured for several years in the materials of the public organization “Nord-

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Ost." For example: Lyubov Chizhova. "Our state is a cannibal!" / Radio Liberty, October 26, 2017.

517 Ibid.

518Catherine Belton. Putin’s People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West, 2020 ÿ.

519Interview with the authors, 2023

520The president's secret conversation with the head of the FSB about storming the building of the Nord-Ost musical was lip-read / NewsRu.com, October 29, 2002

521Interview with the authors of the former NTV manager, 2024

522Interview with the authors, 2023

523Putin. Film by Andrey Kondrashov / Russia-1, 2018

524Vladimir Putin's interview, full text / The Washington Post, September 26, 2003

525Sergey Medvedev. Lubyanka. Ordinary terrorism / Ostankino TV with the participation of the FSB Public Relations Center, 2003

526Interview with the authors, 2023

527Sergey Topol. The Last Victim / Kommersant. Vlast, July 7, 2003.

528The most famous episode of this kind was connected with Anna Politkovskaya’s publication about a certain Khanpash Terkibaev, a Chechen who claimed that he was part of a terrorist squad in Moscow, but then

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He disappeared (Anna Politkovskaya. One of the terrorist group survived. We found him / Novaya Gazeta, April 28, 2003). Terkibaev later died in a car accident. His claims have been repeatedly disputed. Aslan Maskhadov's former official press secretary, Mairbek Vachagaev, believes that Terkibaev was simply a fantasist.

529Yuri Shchekochikhin. Secret Heroes / Novaya Gazeta, March 3, 2003

530During the attack by Chechen militants on Budyonnovsk in 1995, which we described, the total number of hostages taken by terrorists in different places and at different moments of the operation reached one and a half thousand people.
man.

531According to the Public Opinion Foundation, during 2004 and January 2005, Putin’s trust rating fell almost in half – from 43 to 23% (See: V. Putin: performance assessments and attitudes / bd.fom.ru, September 29, 2005).

532Katya Arenina. Unnatural Numbers. Part Two. A story about how sociologists made Russians love Putin and the war in Ukraine / Project, July 7, 2022

533The VTsIOM website regularly publishes only trust ratings of politicians. For example: Trust ratings of politicians, assessments of the work of the President and the Government, support for political parties / wciom.ru, February 28, 2025.

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534This hasn't stopped Russian parliamentarians from repeatedly establishing commissions to investigate events abroad. All of these commissions were created for propaganda purposes. For example, the commission to investigate the war in South Ossetia in 2008 or the commission that is still operating today to "investigate criminal acts against minors."

"sides of the Kyiv regime."

535 From here on out, this is a series of interviews with the authors, 2021–2024

536 Ibid.

Neither Yabloko nor the Union of Right Forces were able to form factions in the Duma. Only seven single-mandate deputies from both parties entered parliament, more than half of whom soon defected to United Russia.

538Interview with the authors, 2024

Patrushev's words were previously reported to the media by State Duma deputy Alexei Mitrofanov. Elena Rudneva. Beslan handed over to a commission / Gazeta.Ru, September 20, 2004.

540The FSB claimed that Anisimov at that time “supervised the entire FSB agent network in the North Caucasus” (Elena Milashina. Beslan. Results of the investigation / Novaya Gazeta, August 28, 2006), which looked

an obvious lie.

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A person familiar with the then leadership of Ingushetia told us about Zyazikov's whereabouts. Author interview, 2023.

[542] Elena Milashina. Beslan: Investigation Results / Novaya Gazeta, August 28, 2006.

543You can find this video online using the most inappropriate search query: "Time for Fun." This caption was used by a Beslan resident who was taken hostage to film the happy children at the school assembly on September 1st. The terrorists seized the camera and used it to record what was happening in the seized school. The fate of the camera's owner is unknown. 544Leonid Stogov. Valentina Matviyenko will deal with the leadership of Voenmekh / Kommersant, February 22, 2003.

The full text of Yuri Savelyev's dissenting opinion can be found on the website "Pravda Beslana" / pravdabeslana.ru

[546] Elena Milashina. Beslan: Investigation Results / Novaya Gazeta, August 28, 2006.

[547] Ibid.

[548] Theses of the report by Alexander Torshin, Chairman of the Parliamentary Commission for the Investigation of the Causes and Circumstances of the Terrorist Act

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In Beslan / Rossiyskaya Gazeta, December 28, 2005. The full text of the report was published only in 2006, and this was done by its critics—you can find the document on the website pravdabeslana.ru. Torshin was outraged by this fact.

549For example, see the article by the famous Ossetian writer and publicist Ruslan Totrov “Beslan. In Search of Truth” / Daryal, March 2006.

[550] Torshin even claimed that the theory about Maskhadov's possible visit to Beslan had been investigated and found to be unfounded. According to Bilalov, no such investigation actually took place.

551Musa Muradov. Murder Sentence Handed Down with Extensive Caution / Kommersant, December 12, 2009.

552Mikhail Maglov, Iva Tsoi, Roman Badanin. Smoking kills / Project, January 16, 2025

553 Episodes described in the anonymous VChK-OGPU Telegram channel and on the crime news website RuCriminal.info, November 2022.

Andrey Soldatov, Irina Borogan. New Nobility. Essays on the History of the FSB, 2010.

555As far as we can tell, his name is Nikolai Zakharov, but you won’t find this information on the FSB websites.

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556Furthermore , the editor-in-chief of Izvestia, in an interview with the Rosbalt news agency on September 3, stated that "the press can afford a broad discussion about the correctness of methods for combating terrorism." See: Miklós Haraszti. Report on Russian Media Coverage of the Beslan Tragedy: Access to Information and Working Conditions for Journalists / OSCE, September 16, 2004.

557Interview with the authors, 2024

558Meeting with representatives of the association of victims of terrorist attacks "Mothers of Beslan" / YouTube, August 20, 2024

559Interview with the authors, 2023

560Press conference of Vladimir Putin / kremlin.ru, December 20, 2012

561Putin. Film by Andrey Kondrashov / Russia-1, 2018

562Interview with the authors, 2024

563Interview with the authors, 2024

564Interview with the authors, 2023

565 David Crawford, Marcus Bensmann. Putin's Early Years / Correctiv, July 30, 2015

566 From here on, the story about Novichok is based on the stories of three scientists: Vil Mirzayanov, Vladimir Uglev, and Leonid Rink.

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567Interview with Natalka Pisna. Vil Mirzayanov: "Rookie" It can be synthesized or stolen, but few will be able to use it / BBC News Russian Service, March 16, 2018

568The veteran of the Soviet special services, Pavel Sudoplatov, wrote about Mairanovsky's career ("Special Operations. Lubyanka and the Kremlin. 1930–1950," 1997).

569 Luke Harding. Russia's Lab X: poison factory that helped silence Soviets' critics / The Guardian, March 9, 2018

Vil Mirzayanov told the BBC that the KGB was responsible for developing mobile versions of Novichok. See: Natalka Pisnya. Vil Mirzayanov: Novichok can be synthesized or stolen, but few will be able to use it / BBC News Russian Service, March 16, 2018.

571For example: Vladimir Abarinov. Boris Kuznetsov: Towards a State Based on the Rule of Law and Back / Top Secret, March 25, 2013.

572Viktor Nekhezin. Novaya Gazeta journalist Anna Politkovskaya hospitalized with severe poisoning / Radio Liberty, September 3, 2004.

573 Yegor Gaidar. "I was poisoned and Russia's political enemies were surely behind it" / The Financial Times, 6 ÿÿÿÿÿÿÿ 2006

574 Coroner Nicholas Hilliard. Inquest into the death of Alexander Perepilichnyy / judiciary.uk, December 19, 2018

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[575] This is the diagnosis doctors gave to Evgenia Kara-Murza, the politician’s wife.

[576] Former executive director dies RUSADA Nikita Kamaev / TASS, February 14, 2016

[577] Ibid.

[578] Commented Kai-Uwe Eckardt, professor at the Charité hospital. See: Sickened Pussy Riot activist discharged from German hospital / Associated Press, September 26 2018

579This part of the story has been reconstructed from the recollections of Dmitry Bykov and Alexander Polupan (interview with the authors, 2024).

[580] The Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Army is widely known by its old name, the Main Intelligence Directorate.

[581] Skripal Suspect Boshirov Identified as GRU Colonel Anatoly Chepiga / Bellingcat, September 26, 2018; Full report: Skripal Poisoning Suspect Dr. Alexander Mishkin, Hero of Russia / Bellingcat, October 9, 2018

582Hunting the Hunters: How We Identified Navalny’s FSB Stalkers / Bellingcat, 14 ÿÿÿÿÿÿÿ 2020 ÿ.

583Bellingcat, CNN, Der Spiegel, The Insider. FSB chemical weapons team implicated in Alexei Navalny's Novichok poisoning, December 28

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2020; Russian poet Dmitry Bykov was hunted by Navalny's poisoners / Bellingcat, June 24, 2021

584 Ekaterina Shulman: We're fed up with all the outstanding cinematography of our existence / Echo, August 17, 2023

585Monkey Cage. Why did Russia poison one of its ex-spies in Britain? / The Washington Post, 20 ÿÿÿÿÿ 2018 ÿ.

586Source: Navalny drank moonshine before the flight / Moskovsky Komsomolets, August 20, 2020

587Dmitry Bykov is on a ventilator / 5-tv.ru, April 17, 2019

588Interview with the authors, 2024

Andrey Zakharov, Katya Arenina, Ekaterina Reznikova, Mikhail Rubin, Roman Badanin. Chef and Cook. Part 5 / Project, July 12, 2023

590Self-designation of Georgian Jews.

Vladimir Putin's big press conference / kremlin.ru, December 20, 2018

592Putin. Film by Andrey Kondrashov / Russia-1, 2018

593Nikita Likhachev. "Anonymous International" published the memoirs of the alleged "Putin's chef" Yevgeny Prigozhin / TJournal, May 8, 2015.

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594Polina and Pasha Prigozhin. Indraguzik, 2002.

595Interview with the authors, 2014

Ilya Zhegulev. Investigation: How Putin's Personal Chef Will Feed the Army for 92 Billion Rubles / Forbes, March 17, 2013.

597 Elizaveta Surganova, Denis Dmitriev. "Russian Forbes" Was Scammed for Advertising. How Dozens of Russian Media Bought an Interview with "Sergei Solovyov" / Lenta.Ru, June 14, 2013.

598Interview with Lyubov Sobol and the authors, 2024

599Final report on the circumstances of the murder of Orkhan Dzhemal, Alexander Rastorguev and Kirill Radchenko in the Central African Republic / Dossier Center, October 25, 2019

600Denis Korotkov. Khail Petrovich / Dossier Center, April 10, 2023

601Interview with the authors, 2024

602The story of Zolotov and other guards is described based on a series of interviews with the authors (2014–2024), documents, open data, and early publications.

603Interview with the authors, 2024

604Ivan Mironov. Walled-In. Chronicles of the Kremlin Central Prison, 2009

Andrey Zakharov, Roman Badanin. Iron Masks. Part 1 / Project, November 24, 2020

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[606] Roman Romanovsky, Roman Badanin, Mikhail Maglov, Mikhail Rubin. Life and morals of the era of P. Part 4 / Project, July 23, 2024

607Interview with Izmestiev's colleague to the authors, 2024. See also: Ekaterina Zapodinskaya. "Igor Izmestiev was entrusted with demolishing the mansion" / Kommersant, July 22, 2008.

[608] Ekaterina Zapodinskaya. Igor Izmestyev was entrusted demolish the mansion / Kommersant, July 22, 2008

609Data from the public service Wikimapia for an object with coordinates 55°44'47"N 37°12'4"E.

610Andrey Kolesnikov. "After all, life has changed dramatically more than once" / Kommersant, February 9, 2016

611Author Interview Series, 2015–2023

[612] Roman Anin. Palaces under Guard / Novaya Gazeta, November 19, 2018.

613House Arrest / Premier, August 16, 2018

Sergey Titov, Olga Churakova, Roman Badanin. Cadet Brotherhood / Project, October 22, 2020

Olga Churakova, Maria Zholobova, Roman Badanin. Waiters / Project, November 20, 2019

616Bojan Pancevski. The Dark Figure at the Center of Putin’s Prisoner-Swap Demands / The Wall Street Journal, 1 ÿÿÿÿÿÿÿ 2024

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617Interview with the authors, 2024

618Interview with the authors, 2024

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620Nikolay Fedyanin, Oleg Khlebnikov. Escort Killers / Novaya Gazeta, August 16, 1999; Nikolay Fedyanin. Escort Killers-2 / Novaya Gazeta, February 14, 2000

621 Timofey Grishin. Petrov and Boshirov in the service of Suleiman Kerimov / RuCriminal, August 30, 2022. This story was confirmed by the authors through an interview with a participant in the events, 2025.

622Interview with the authors, 2025

623Nikolay Shcheglov, elected to the State Duma in September 2021.

624Mikhail Rubin, Dmitry Sukharev, Mikhail Maglov, Roman Badanin, Svetlana Reiter. Remembering Death. An Investigation for Vladimir Putin's 70th Birthday / Proekt, April 1, 2022. 625Maria Golovanivskaya. The Central Clinical Hospital

as a Center for Governance of the Country / Kommersant, March 16, 1999. 626Svetlana Reiter, Pavel Miledin. A Hospital for the

President. A Building for High-Ranking Russian Officials Will Be Created at the Central Clinical Hospital / Forbes.kz, January 19, 2017.

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Mark Krutov, Sergei Dobrynin. "Mercenaries, Female Athletes, and Putin's Friends. Secrets of the Sogaz Clinic" / Radio Liberty, November 17, 2021.

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629Mikhail Zygar. Putin thinks he is still in control. He’s not / The New York Times, 30 ÿÿÿÿ 2023 ÿ.

630 Memorable events of August, the death of Prigozhin / Levada Center, September 1, 2023

631For example: Thomas Latschan. Mysterious deaths among Russian oligarchs / Deutsche Welle, July 5, 2022.

632 From here on about Patrushev - interview with the authors, 2024

Andrey Pertsev, Margarita Lyutova, Liliya Yapparova, Svetlana Reiter. Why will economist Belousov be the new defense minister? Why was Shoigu fired? And what will change now? / Meduza, May 13, 2024.

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636Alexander Gamov. The President's Father Defended the Nevsky Pyatachok / Komsomolskaya Pravda, January 27, 2004.

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638Ilya Vasyunin, Roman Badanin. Dashing zeros / Pro-ekt, October 17, 2018

639 Evgeny Sigal. Andrey Illarionov: I told Medvedev that this was nonsense / Kommersant. Money, October 10, 2011.

640Interview with the authors, 2023

641Approval of Vladimir Putin's activities / Levada Center.

642Boris Yeltsin. Presidential Marathon: Reflections, Memories, Impressions…, 2000

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644Sergey Sokolov. We're Putting an End to It / Novaya Gazeta, July 3, 2013.

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645A series of interviews with one of the authors, 2023-2024.

646 Ilya Rozhdestvensky, Maxim Solopov. RBC Investigation: Where the "Nemtsov Case" Led / RBC, January 20, 2016

647Author Interview Series, 2023-2024

[648] Elena Afonina. Kadyrov explained his tough stance on uncoordinated security operations / TASS, April 23, 2015.

Putin called himself and all defenders infantrymen during his visit to Chechnya / Vedomosti, August 21, 2024

650For example: Mikhail Alekseev. "Cooperation between the intelligence services and Basayev took place" / Kommersant. Vlast, September 13, 2004; Petr Pryanishnikov. Conspiracy-2 / Version, July 4, 2000.

651The story of Alexander Nevzorov is told based on a series of interviews with three of his acquaintances, 2022–2024, as well as documents, open data, and early publications.

652 Nevzorov: "I'm not a confidant of the Putin who twists journalists into a ram's horn. I'm personally obligated to him," interview with Ksenia Sobchak / Dozhd, February 21, 2013.

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653The last time, for example, here: Putin's Price / YouTube channel Aleksandr Nevzorov, February 9, 2025

Alexander Nevzorov's 2011 interview on the program "Visiting Dmitry Gordon" / YouTube channel "Visiting Gordon." Part 2, August 2, 2012.

655Criminal Russia. The Great Confrontation, 2007

656Alexander Nevzorov's program "600 seconds" / Channel Five, June 15, 1991

657Author's program by Sergei Dorenko / ORT, October 24, 1999

658The story of Sergei Dorenko is reproduced based on interviews with two of his acquaintances, the authors, 2024, open data and earlier publications.

659Anna Petrova, Anatoly Chernyakov, Svetlana Klimova, Ekaterina Yadova. "Fatherland—All Russia" Bloc Leads in Pre-Election Ratings / bd.fom.ru, September 3, 1999.

660Author's program by Sergei Dorenko / ORT, October 3, 1999

661Author's program by Sergei Dorenko / ORT, October 24, 1999.

Machine Translated by Google

662This was confirmed, among other things, by the later published recordings of telephone conversations between Berezovsky and Dorenko: “Seryozha, think about this kind of scam...” / Novaya Gazeta, December 16, 1999.

663 A performer of classical repertoire, 2024, noted in a conversation with the authors.

664By that time, Dorenko’s program had been pushed off the rails.
The ting time on Sunday was replaced by a less busy Saturday. The Duma elections had already passed, and the brainwashing could be relaxed a little. Interview with ORT TV channel / kremlin.ru, January 15, 2000.

665Interview with the authors, 2024

666 This is how Berezovsky’s friend Alexander Goldfarb recalls the events in Petr Aven’s book “Berezovsky’s Time,” 2018.

Boris Berezovsky. "Personal Freedoms Are the Main Law of a Democratic Society." An Open Letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin / Kommersant, May 31, 2000.

The chronology of events is reproduced from: Daria Burlakova. Chronicle of the Kursk Submarine's Loss and the Preservation of Its Memory in Society / Kommersant, August 12, 2022.

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Alexander Goldfarb, Marina Litvinenko. Death of a Dissident, 2007

670The episode below is reproduced from: Meeting with Relatives. Transcript of the meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and relatives of the Kursk submarine crew on August 22 / Kommersant. Vlast, August 29, 2000.

671Voloshin himself spoke about the meeting while giving evidence in the High Court of London in November 2011. The conversation was first described in more detail in the book Death of a Dissident by Alex Goldfarb and Marina Litvinenko , 2007.

672Meeting with relatives. Transcript of the meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and relatives of the Kursk submarine crew on August 22 / Kommersant. Vlast, August 29, 2000.

673Author's program by Sergei Dorenko / ORT, September 2, 2000.

674Interview with the authors, 2024

675Dorenko on the Russian people, Putin, and money / YouTube channel "vDud", August 14, 2018

676Boris Berezovsky. To the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin. On freedom of speech and ORT campaigns / Kommersant, September 5, 2000.

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677Sergey Dorenko: “I remember Putin 7 years ago, right after the tragedy with the Kursk submarine,” The New Times, August 20, 2007.

678 Ibid. However, a Putin subordinate from that time doubts that the president's communication with the journalist could have been so confidential back then (interview with the authors, 2024).

679Interview with the authors, 2024

680Interview with the authors, 2024

This phrase is a quote from the book "Survive the World" (1976) by Nigerian writer Cyprian Ekwensi. It is supported by numerous episodes, from the Biafran War to the Rwandan massacres, in which radio stations played a crucial role.

Aidar Buribaev, Roman Badanin. How the Authorities Read Your Blogs / Forbes, August 15, 2012

683Iron Ladies / NTV, March 24, 2013

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685Ilya Rozhdestvensky, Roman Badanin, Mikhail Rubin. Serial Oligarch / Project, February 13, 2019

686Alexander Nevzorov and his wife were granted Ukrainian citizenship / Radio Liberty, June 3, 2022

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687The Modern History of Russian Politics, Told in Text Messages. Part I / The Insider, April 1, 2015

688The rape allegations were first reported by former British Ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray. Usmanov has disputed this for years.
claim, insisting he was imprisoned on "trumped-up charges," the details of which he, however, does not provide. See here: Yulia Sapronova. An Old Case: Where Did Usmanov's Rape Accusation Come From / RBC, May 26, 2017.

689Author Interview Series, 2015–2024

690Interview with the authors, 2024

691The circumstances of this meeting are recounted by two of its participants. Interview with the authors, 2024.

692Artem Platov. Apple Puy / Kommersant. Vlast, December 12, 2011.

693Interview with one of the authors, 2012

694Interview with the authors, 2024

The episode below is reproduced based on the words of two former Kommersant managers. Author interviews, 2024.

696A year later, Usmanov, knowing about Kovalsky’s dire financial situation, allowed him to return.

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Kommersant took the meaningless position of creative director. In 2019, Kovalsky died of cancer—Kommersant, which still belongs to Usmanov, was among those paying for his treatment.

new.

697Kommersant employees published a letter in defense of Kovalsky / Lenta.ru, December 14, 2011.

698Jared Diamond, Collapse: Why Societies Thrive and Others Fail, 2005

699This story was also told by Ksenia Sobchak. See: Gabrelyanov's Royal Gift / Snob, July 8, 2013.

700Katya Arenina, Alexey Korostelev, Mikhail Rubin, Mikhail Maglov, Roman Badanin. House of Soviets. A Guide to Putin's Experts / Project, December 20, 2023

701Interview with the authors, 2024

[702] Conversation with Vladimir Putin. Continued, December 15, 2011

703Criminal Russia. The Great Confrontation, 2007

704Dolls. Little Tsakhes / NTV, January 30, 2000

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705Interview with Viktor Shenderovich in 2007 on the program "Visiting Dmitry Gordon" / YouTube channel "Visiting Gordon." Part 2, November 9, 2014. 706Interview with an eyewitness

to the incident by the authors, 2023.

707 "How do you win a war if your grandfather is an asshole?" Meduza YouTube channel, May 9, 2023

708Interview with the authors, 2024

709Vladimir Rakhmankov. Putin as a Phallic Symbol of Russia / Italic, May 18, 2006

710In practice, this name conceals amendments made simultaneously to two laws: the Code of Administrative Offences and “On Information, Information Technologies and Protection from Information”.

711 Human rights activists calculated in 2019: “A vote of no respect for the president: the first half of the ‘Klishas law’,” International Agora report, 2019. 712 Interview with the authors, 2024.

713Polina Matveeva. To the White House under escort / Gazeta.Ru, April 10, 2008

714Mikhail Rubin, Maria Zholobova, Roman Badanin. Puppetmaster / Project, January 23, 2019

715 Investigate this: Who is doing journalistic "dissemination"? "following" in Russian / RT, January 17, 2019

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716Interview with the authors, 2018

717Interview with the authors, 2024

Alexei Navalny. Vladimir Solovyov's Apartments, Dacha, and Italian Villa / navalny.com, September 28, 2017.

719Historical Process. The State and Private Life: From the Soviet Article on Homosexuality to Today's Anti-Gay Law / Russia-1, April 4, 2012

720 "Welcome": Kiselev responded to a proposal for a Foreign Ministry briefing at his home / RIA Novosti Crimea, October 2, 2018

721Traveling to War. A war report by Margarita Simonyan from Chechnya, 1999 / Rutube, April 10, 2022

722 Elena Tregubova. Tales of a Kremlin Digger, 2003

723Interview with the authors, 2024

724Vesti / Russia-1, September 3, 2004

725 Evgeniya Stogova. The Ministry of Finance proposed revising budget expenditures on media / RBC, October 3, 2023; Alexander Slabiev. RT will receive the largest budget funding / Secret of the Firm, December 23, 2021.

726Yulia Balakhonova, Mikhail Rubin, Roman Badanin, Katya Arenina. New World. A Guide to Russian

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Media in the Time of Total Censorship / Project, August 15, 2022

727Parasites / YouTube channel "Alexei Navalny", March 10, 2020

[728] Margarita Simonyan's Instagram, March 16, 2020. The post was unavailable at the time of publication.

[729] Margarita Simonyan's Instagram, March 26, 2020. The post is unavailable at the time of publication. 730Margarita

Simonyan lost her child. Vityazyeva pointed to the culprit: "They bullied her for weeks" / tsargrad.tv, March 26, 2020.

[731] Roman Badanin, Anfisa Voronina, Farida Rustamova. RBC Investigation: Who's Behind the Moscow State University Expansion / RBC, January 28, 2015

732Oleg Kashin. She / Kashin.guru, January 29, 2015

733A Reuters source named the head of a foundation working with Moscow State University as Putin’s daughter / RBC, January 29, 2015

734Interview with one of the authors, 2015

735Interview with Grigory Yavlinsky in 2011 on the program “Visiting Dmitry Gordon,” Part 2 / YouTube channel “Visiting Gordon,” June 19, 2014

736Interview with the authors, 2024

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Daniil Sotnikov, Roman Badanin. Friends on Special Assignments / Project, December 25, 2019

738Roman Anin. Russia: Businessman Handles Insider Homes / OCCRP, 31 ÿÿÿÿÿ 2016 ÿ.

739Stephen Gray, Jack Stubbs. The Realtor for Putin's Friends / Reuters, March 31, 2016 740Olesya Shmagun, Irina Dolinina, Alisa Kustikova, Alesya Marokhovskaya. The Wallet of the Russian Elite / Meduza, March 4, 2019; Irina Dolinina, Olesya Shmagun, Antonio Baquiero, Max Jimenez Botias, Karina Shchedrovski. Akulinino on the Costa Brava / Meduza, March 28, 2019

741Yachts, oligarchs, girls: a man-hunter exposes a bribe-taker / YouTube channel "Alexei Navalny", February 8, 2018

742Kirill Martynov. The Pornopolitical Trial / Novaya Gazeta, February 12, 2018

743Interview with the authors, 2022

744President. Film by Vladimir Solovyov / Russia-1, April 15, 2015

745Putin. Film by Andrey Kondrashov / Russia-1, 2018

746Kondrashov's story is reproduced on the basis of a series of interviews with his colleagues by the authors (2024), documents and open data.

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747One of his former colleagues confirms this, and he himself asserted this in an interview. See: Vera Tsvetkova. "Successful and Accomplished: Parallel Positions" / Nezavisimaya Gazeta, January 25, 2008. 748 "Scarlet Sails." Film by Andrei Kondrashov /

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